

**“APPOINT IN EVERY CITY ELDERS”:
A CONSIDERATION OF PLURAL ELDERSHIP
IN CONGREGATIONALLY GOVERNED CHURCHES**

**A THESIS-PROJECT
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF
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to the memory of Clema Oleeta McConnell Broughton

“Her children rise up and call her blessed...” – Proverbs 31:28

τούτου χάριν ἀπέλιπόν σε ἐν Κρήτῃ ἵνα τὰ λείποντα ἐπιδιορθώσῃ καὶ καταστήσῃς κατὰ πόλιν πρεσβυτέρους ὡς ἐγώ σοι διεταξάμην

For this reason I left you in Crete: that what remains you may set in order and appoint in every city elders as I directed you...

— Titus 1:5

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ABSTRACT

This thesis-project considers whether the adoption of an elder-based leadership structure might positively contribute to spiritual health of a congregational church. After setting out a biblical and theological foundation, relevant literature in the field is considered. A survey instrument is used to compare and contrast congregationally governed churches seeking possible correlations between leadership structure types and churches' spiritual well-being as reported by their pastors. The writer suggests that his research provides evidence the thesis is worthy of further consideration and study.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION AND HYPOTHESIS

“What kind of a future is there for a little church like this one?” Tyler asked the visiting preacher.¹ The little congregation had dispersed, and Tyler was waiting to lock up the church building while the minister retrieved his Bible and notes after greeting the departing worshippers. Without waiting for an answer, the younger man went on:

It’s long past its prime, sad to say. When I was a kid, there were more people here, though even then the building was rarely full. There was an active Sunday school, though, and even a children’s choir—I sang in myself. The women’s missionary group was active and Christian endeavor for the youth—it seemed that something was always going on around here. But now, our usual attendance is less than twenty, and only two families with children attend more or less regularly. These old buildings need constant upkeep that we can barely manage. We move downstairs for the winter to save heating expense, but even with some trust fund income, which isn’t that dependable, we still can’t afford a full time pastor. I’m not sure how we’ve kept going as long as we have! The downtown area around the church is run down and unattractive. Even if the local economy ever picks up—which I don’t see happening anytime soon—I’m not sure that will bring much change for the church.

Sensing the pessimistic tone of his words, Tyler tried to take a more positive tack and continued before his listener could respond:

We’re stubborn Yankees, though! Over fifty years ago, the young pastor here wrote his master’s thesis on this church. ‘Not much hope’ was his verdict. The town was mostly Catholics then, and what Protestants there were seemed to be dwindling in number. In his opinion, demographics were against us, so he thought the church didn’t have much of a future, but we’ve held on, making ends meet somehow. I’ll be honest, though; I’m discouraged! Those of us here aren’t getting any younger; new people come, but don’t stay with us. The trust fund income will remain, so long as the market doesn’t crash, but that won’t be enough to do much more than keep the doors open. What good is that, if there’s no congregation? A

¹ Tyler is a fictional character, a composite drawn from the writer’s observations.

church is people, not just a building. I want to believe that things will get better, but sometimes I wonder. What do you think, Pastor?

Though Tyler is a fictional character, the challenge he poses is not fiction, but reality for scores of small churches, not only in New England, but in many contemporary settings. These churches can often point to better times in the past, years when their buildings were newer and their congregations much larger. Retrospect may have made the picture more rosy than it was in reality, but there is no arguing the fact that many churches like Tyler's enjoyed periods of prosperity that cause the present congregation to seem like a shadow of its former self. Multiple worship services have dwindled to one per week, budgets that once supported multiple ministries have shrunk to survival size, and social influence upon the community has disappeared.

This paper is written from the vantage point of a part time pastorate in just such a small church.² Few new members have been admitted in the last decades, and the median age of the small congregation (about 25 in attendance) is relatively high. Almost two hundred years old, the church owns its buildings (a meetinghouse, parish house, and parsonage), but they are old building that are expensive to heat and maintain. The church has not been able to afford more than a part time pastoral salary for many years, even with the help of interest income from trust funds. A handful of people have kept the limited programs of the church (Sunday worship, Sunday school/summer VBS, and sometimes a weekday study/discussion group) going over the past several years.

² The writer's locale is a New England town of about 2,000 residents.

Of relevance is the fact that the history of the church has mirrored that of the town that provides the setting for the church. A hundred years ago, it was a booming little manufacturing town surrounded by a host of active farms. There were six mills along the river, a railroad connecting to the major metropolis less than two hours away, and a population with many young families. Many household items like furniture and tinwork were made locally, and local stores shipped in and sold the rest that was needed for ordinary use. A large Catholic church and school going to the eighth grade served a sizable French Canadian population, and Baptists and Congregationalists had their own church meetinghouses as well. But technological advance eclipsed water power, and the mills were shut down as larger, better factories were built in more advantageous locations. Farms on rocky hills could not compete with large acreages of better soil elsewhere, and with the demise of factories and farms, young people moved away to find jobs. Rail service was terminated and the tracks torn up, and for recent decades, the town's population became largely stagnant at about two thousand souls.

While the town still enjoys its picturesque setting on the hills surrounding a little river, the social and economic picture is dismal. Two large mill buildings have been converted to low income and elderly housing, but numerous commercial buildings in the town sit vacant. Numerous buildings in the village have absentee landlords and are rented to a relatively transient, younger population characterized by high unemployment, drug and alcohol abuse, and domestic violence and crime. One small factory provides a handful of jobs for locals, but there are few other local businesses, so the working

residents in the town commute to jobs elsewhere in the region. Local children are bussed to school district buildings in a neighboring town. Property taxes in the town are high, and civic morale is low among many residents.

During the decline of the local economy, a tragedy precipitated the bringing together of local Baptists and Congregationalists under one roof. Just prior to Easter in 1919, the Congregational meetinghouse was destroyed by a fire that spread from an abutting business. Rebuilding was clearly beyond the capability of the Congregational Church membership at that time. The two congregations, Baptist and Congregational agreed to form a federated church, which would use the remaining Baptist church meetinghouse and the parsonage owned by the Congregationalists. In federation, each participant congregation maintained its own identity in terms of membership and financing, but at the same time a new entity, the federated church was created, made up of the membership of the already existing churches who then acted as a body to fund ministries, call a pastor, *etc*. This was a cumbersome mechanism, but it allowed old church loyalties and denominational connections to continue. The Baptist congregation continued its affiliation with the American Baptist Convention, and the Congregationalists maintained their connection with the United Church of Christ.

Developments after federation were spelled out in a master's thesis written by Verne Smith, a seminarian and the federated church's pastor from 1945-1947. In the preface to his paper (completed in 1948 after leaving the pastorate), he stated his paper's purpose: "Believing that federation is one of the better answers to the over-churched area

problem, it is hoped that this study might show how such federation is possible and necessary in similar communities.”³ After providing some historical data that provided a time line for the churches prior to and subsequent to federation, Smith summed up the previous quarter-century of the church and its prospects for the future:

Since Mr. Dunbar’s pastorate [terminated by his death in 1923] the complexion of things has changed drastically for the worse, in so far as the Federated Church is concerned. A series of short pastorates up to the present indicated [*sic*] that the church has been losing ground. The present prospects for the church are indeed dull, for there are few Protestant families left in town, and these families have few children.⁴

Due to the declining Protestant population, the seminarian and pastor held out little hope for better times ahead for the church, even after pooling the resources of the original two congregations:

This past year the Greenville Mills [a local factory] contributed \$500 to the Church to help [it] through this difficult period, but one can hardly feel encouraged when the population of the town is about 1100, of which 900 are communicants of the Roman Catholic Church. The youth population is around forty with new born children included.⁵

³Verne M. Smith, "A History of the Second Congregational Church of Greenville, (Mason Harbor or Mason Village) New Hampshire" (Master's Thesis, Andover Newton Theological Seminary, 1948), i. The writer discovered this thesis in the records of the church he pastors, and includes it for its personal relevance to his ministry context and this research. Smith was pastor of the congregation, which at that time was structured as a federated church. The thesis provides an historical survey of the Congregational Church, carrying the history through the church federation that occurred in 1942. For the most part, the thesis is merely a summary of statistics and major events. The author stated “The history of this church is strictly limited to the records of the church and society, and the Federated Church. Verbal statements have not been included, for obvious reasons.” It is regrettable that Smith failed to make use of the personal accounts of church members, as that would have provided his history with a much fuller picture of the church’s life.

⁴ Smith, 19.

⁵ Smith, 23.

In summary, Pastor Smith saw a bleak future for the church, and he left the pastorate before he finished and submitted his paper.

Little happened to challenge Smith's thesis during the second half of the 20th Century, except that the Roman Catholic church declined significantly as well, closing its school and losing its full time priest. The path of federation that Smith commended did not prove to be a long term solution to what he quaintly called "the over-churched area problem." By the 1990s, the Baptist church had dwindled to a few elderly members, though the Congregationalists still numbered a dozen or so. Invested funds acquired as gifts and bequests enabled the churches to survive with part time pastoral ministry. In 1999, the congregations that remained dissolved all three church entities—Baptist, Congregational, and Federated, severing their denominational ties at the same time and creating the Greenville Community Christian Church, with a broadly evangelical statement of faith and church administration through an executive board. As was the case with the federated churches, the new church has been a way-station for pastors who went on to full-time ministry in other places, and it is fair to say that the congregation entered the 21st Century with a mindset that reflected the survival mentality articulated by its former seminarian pastor fifty years previous. The church is in many ways typical of the small churches described by the fictional Tyler in this chapter's opening scene.

It must be admitted that the problems for such churches are internal as well as external. While Tyler exemplifies a concern felt, if not admitted, by the remaining church members, he and his friends lack motivation for the pursuit of changes that might bring

growth for the congregation. A survival mentality encourages cost-cutting and lowered expectations, and it looks backward to better times. It becomes hard even to envision a future that is not more of the same. There is a comfort in familiarity, and slow deterioration does not alarm in the way that a sudden catastrophe would. Perhaps it is better to do what one can to slow the decline rather than take risks that might bring disaster. A dust settles, literally and figuratively, over the church. The church buildings themselves become metaphors for the spiritual bodies that use them: suffering from a benign neglect, they are falling quietly into disrepair. Tarnished brass reflects the fading outlook for the future, and there seems to be little point to polishing dusty pews that will remain empty.

A new pastor arrives at a church like Tyler's and will be met with friendly greetings. A fresh face is welcomed in the pulpit, and if his preaching gifts are limited, his sermons will at least pique interest because they are new to the congregation. Energetic efforts on the pastor's part will be lauded, but they will prove insufficient to overcome the congregation's inertia, and the techniques he learned at seminary seem to avail little. A few people will dislike his style, and a few new people who like it will replace them, but the net effect will be negligible, and the new status quo will look very much like the old one. Barring any gross negligence or misconduct on the part of the pastor, the members and attendees will as a whole be content with the church's seasonal routine. Either the pastor will settle into satisfaction with this routine as well, or he will realize that if his goals for himself as a pastor are to be preserved, they will have to be met elsewhere. If

the former is the case, pastor and congregation will age more or less gracefully together, barring changes in local demographics that hasten the church's decline and death. If the pastor is not willing to live with the church's status quo, he and the church will separate, neither party having changed much beyond being perhaps a little sadder and wiser.

Or it may be that Tyler's struggling church may call an older pastor, one who has settled into a survival mentality himself, though for both pastor and congregation there will be a pleasantness to the making of new acquaintances. He will appreciate the history of the church and the church will appreciate his maturity, and there will be an unspoken assumption of limited expectations on both sides. An easy familiarity will soon develop that will, for a time, seem to indicate a match made in heaven, but it will often be the case that familiarity will breed contempt, and a chronic disappointment will set in. The pastor may quietly begin to look for a greener, or at least different, pasture, or if he is approaching retirement age, he may hang on to the hopefully not so bitter end, when both he and the congregation will breathe a sigh of relief.

Many attractive alternatives are offered by academia and the media for rejuvenation of churches like Tyler's, but they rarely meet with success in application. The latest church growth theory may be attempted with great sincerity, but like Saul's armor on David, it will prove ill-fitted and cumbersome, more of an embarrassment than a help in the end. A well-marketed development program or best selling book may seem to bring results at first, but they fail to live up to their media reports and are quietly shelved. If the pastor becomes a partisan follower of a popular preacher and seeks to

replicate that celebrity's model in Tyler's little church, division will likely result, ending with the pastor's leaving or the demise of the congregation. Even if none of these negative scenarios develops, the latest celebrity preacher, musician, or teacher in the popular media will undermine the struggling church's efforts, siphoning off attention and money for the celebrity's ministry, which all too often ends with disgrace that will reflect negatively on the local church in the minds of their neighbors. With such a pessimistic outlook, it is no wonder that many pastors and lay people opt for planting new churches. New churches rarely mean new people, however, and it is to be expected that folks will bring with them the histories of their own churches, and face similar kinds of challenges to those faced by little congregations like Tyler's.

The writer proposes to address the problem posed at the beginning of this chapter by looking to the pastors of churches like Tyler's. Having rehearsed and illustrated the negative factors, both without and within, attending the atrophy of many small churches, it may seem counterintuitive to return to someone like the writer himself, an ordinary pastor in a small church. Perhaps, however, that seeming dead end is precisely the point at which a beginning must be made, for pastors of churches like Tyler's have opportunities that no one else has. No individual from outside has the personal and spiritual presence that he has within the church he serves. No author of a best selling book or video personality can gain the credibility of a pastor who has listened to a couple lament a third miscarriage, been with a family celebrating a marriage, and helped wash the dishes after a church supper. No denominational official or parachurch ministry leader

can speak so directly into a person's life as can the pastor who preaches at a loved one's funeral. No popular sports or music figure can know the emotional connection of the pastor who speaks words of forgiveness to a weeping teenager confessing sin. If there is hope for the future of a small church, it must of necessity find its realization in connection with the ministry of the church's pastor.

If the answer begins with the pastor, however, it does not end with him, but involves those to whom he is personally connected in the church. The interpersonal nature of the pastoral relationship means, then, that the answer to the atrophy of the small church will be discovered in the context of the connection between pastor and church. Like no other institution on earth save marriage and family, a local church prospers or perishes in dependence upon interpersonal relationships. A more prosperous future, then, for Tyler's church will take shape as those interpersonal relationships themselves prosper, as the people who make up the Body of Christ in that local manifestation are enjoying growing and deepening relationships with Christ and one another. This may seem simplistic, but a simple starting point enables one to have a solid basis upon which to think and act. What concrete steps, then, may a church take which will enable not mere survival, but growth and blessing for its members?

This writer contends that there is only one authoritative source for the defining of relationships within the Church as a whole and for a local church in specific: God's Word, the Bible. This study therefore has first in mind the identification and movement towards the biblical model for those relationships. It will be assumed that progress

towards this biblical model on the part of a local church will bring with it blessing for that body. A full working out of the biblical model for a church's interpersonal relationships is beyond the scope of a brief study like this project, but it should be possible to focus in on a key area of concern that might possibly move a congregation in a positive direction out of a place of stagnation and atrophy, and for that the writer will turn to consider the basic structure for leadership within the personal relationships that comprise a local church body.

This paper will argue that the proper model for pastoral leadership is one that incorporates a plurality of elders who serve together as leaders of the congregation. The writer's thesis is that the pursuit of this model will have a beneficial and observable effect on the church as a body. He will seek to establish a biblical basis for the plurality of elders model and seek evidence for the beneficial effects of such a model. That will then form a rationale for those who would seek to implement that model in their local churches, and it might also have the effect of setting out markers that will help to gauge the improved health and growth for which we hope.

This study's parameters will be limited within the larger spectrum of churches of evangelical doctrine to churches that are congregationally governed, and for purposes of manageability, will be limited further to churches within the writer's denomination of affiliation.⁶ In addition, though it is assumed that the study methods and results might

⁶ For purposes of manageability and application, the writer made use of the data base of the Conservative Congregational Christian Conference for surveys. Further description of the churches whose pastors were surveyed will be included in chapter four, which presents the survey data and analysis.

well have application to churches in other geographic areas, the writer must admit that he has primarily in view the New England area, since that is his field of service. Finally, though once again not to exclude application to congregations of varied membership sizes, the study has primarily in mind already established churches that are relatively small (under 200 in membership).

There will be four stages in this thesis-project. In chapter two, the writer will present a theological basis for the thesis. This will take the form of an examination of relevant biblical teaching, followed by a look at some pertinent developments in Christian theology. The focus for this chapter will be the concept of eldership as it is taught in Scripture and applied in the history of the Church. Chapter three will move into a consideration of literature in the field of church leadership. Here attention will be paid primarily to thinking within the American evangelicalism during the past half-century, and an attempt will be made to perceive trends that pertain to this project's thesis.

Chapter four will describe the composition, implementation, and analysis of a survey that gathered data relative to the subject addressed by the project. Some conclusions will also be attempted that relate the survey analysis to the project thesis. Finally, in chapter five the writer will summarize the project's findings and bring those findings together in the form of conclusions. Included here will be suggestions for consideration of other variables and possible areas for further study and/or research, as well as self-critique of the methods employed in the project as a whole.

From the outset the writer thinks it necessary to qualify the expectations for change inherent in the project's thesis. As a living, even eternal, reality, the Church of Christ in its manifestations as local churches gathered for worship and service is much more than the product of one particular concept or set of ideas. Even a small congregation of believers is such a complex organic entity that their well-being cannot be guaranteed by the application of one particular aspect of truth. Even should the thesis of this study prove to be worthy, it must be asserted that much more remains to be said about what makes for a healthy, thriving church. This study, as stated earlier, seeks merely to make the contribution of one voice to an ongoing conversation among those who love Christ's Church and desire her blessing for his glory.

CHAPTER TWO

THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

But now thus says the LORD,
he who created you, O Jacob,
 he who formed you, O Israel:
“Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
 I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
 and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
 and the flame shall not consume you.
For I am the LORD your God,
 the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.
I give Egypt as your ransom,
 Cush and Seba in exchange for you.
Because you are precious in my eyes,
 and honored, and I love you,
I give men in return for you,
 peoples in exchange for your life.
Fear not, for I am with you;
 I will bring your offspring from the east,
 and from the west I will gather you.
I will say to the north, Give up,
 and to the south, Do not withhold;
bring my sons from afar
 and my daughters from the end of the earth,
everyone who is called by my name,
 whom I created for my glory,
 whom I formed and made.”

- Isaiah 43:1-7¹

The sovereignty of God in creating for his glory a people who are called by his name provides the biblical basis for an understanding of his relationship with them and their relationships with one another. God's leadership and governance of those whom he has created and redeemed is clearly established in Scripture, as is the truth that believers

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the *English Standard Version*.

are not called in isolation from one another, but have been constituted by God as a family, a nation, a kingdom, an assembly, and a body. It has also been widely, if not universally, acknowledged by those of orthodox Christian faith that in the context of the corporate life of God's people there are always some from among those people who serve the people as a whole and as individuals through gifts and acts of leadership. The particular nature of God's exercise of that leadership and governance through human agents has historically been a matter much less agreed upon, even among those who recognize the authority of Scripture, so that today within the company of those who profess Christ as Lord and Scripture as authoritative, there is a continuing debate concerning the structure and practice of church leadership.

The theological basis for this paper's contribution to that conversation concerning church leadership is the biblical concept of the role and right activities of those from among the people of God who are known as elders. Biblical support for elder leadership in churches today locally and regularly gathered for worship is discovered throughout the Scriptures. From Genesis, where patriarchs lead their families and clans in calling upon the name of the LORD to the book of Revelation, where elders lead the Church at last fully assembled for worship in acclaiming the glory of the Lamb, elder leadership is a constant theme. This theme is not always explicit, so a mere word study of the Scriptures does not suffice to draw it out. To the careful reader, however, the contours of elder leadership are discernible throughout the Bible, across literary genres as well as time periods.

In the creation narrative, God reveals an initial intention that there be those who serve him and other human beings as leaders within the earthly realm of creation. Adam, in the sense of the Hebrew term as it names the race of beings created in the image of God, is first created as Adam, the individual human being who is representative of the race. Already in the text, there is visible that element of temporal precedence that is inherent in the idea of elder. Adam the individual predates those of his own flesh and race whom he is appointed to serve through leadership.

While time is not the sole determiner of eldership, so that the determining of elder status is not merely a reckoning of relative age, nevertheless the consideration of age in one form or another is always present in recognizing those who are recognized as elders.² An elder has knowledge and experience given him over a period of time that others do not, and in the temporal realm in which human beings live, that has significance. That all persons fail to gain as much as they might benefit from the time they are given only serves to underscore the truth that passage through time provides the opportunity, if not the reality, of personal growth in those qualities that enable service as leaders that pleases God.

The prototypical elder Adam is given by God responsibilities for and in relationship with those human beings who come after him chronologically. The first is, of course, his wife. In a passive sense, he is responsible for providing for the creation of her body through surrendering a part of his own body. As a Scriptural type, this points to the

² This is, of course, reflected in the Hebrew אֵלֶיךָ (elder), which derives from the word for beard.

perfect self-sacrifice of Christ, who provides for his people through the rending of his own flesh. (While the self-sacrifice of a human elder never has a slavistic quality, it is clear from Scripture that biblical leadership involves a willingness to suffer, even to the point of death, for the sake of those whom one leads.)

Adam's first active responsibility as a leader/elder is seen in his naming of his wife and taking her for his own. This element of embracing as one's own, of identifying oneself with those whom one leads, also points to Christ and becomes a standard for any who are to serve as elders in a biblical sense. Accompanying this identification of self with others in biblical leadership is the assuming of responsibility for others, especially in making decisions on behalf of those others. In this regard, and tragically, Adam provides a negative example of one appointed to be leader, since it is Adam's transgression of God's command that plunges the human race into bondage to sin. (It will be Christ, as the Second Adam, who will be the one whose active obedience qualifies him to make atonement for his people and leads them in the way of righteousness.) In the role and function, then, that God gives to Adam, we see the key elements of knowledge and growth through experience that is generally greater than that of those being led, identification with those whom one serves in a leadership role, and responsibility for making decisions that bring blessing or cursing for oneself and those being led. These elements will form the core of the biblical concept of leadership that informs the meaning of the term *elder* in its fullest sense.

In the post-Fall, antediluvian biblical record, the decline of the human race offers few hints of godly leadership save for Noah, but what we see in him is noteworthy. He serves as the head of his family, which is the remnant of the faithful, not only by virtue of age, but because he leads them through his righteous example. When we see him later in the narrative leading worship in a priestly role after the Flood, we may infer that this is representative of the pattern of his life and is typical of his practice of encouraging those he leads to give praise and thanks to God. His obedient response to God's command, in contrast to Adam's disobedience, leads to the saving of his household. Though not called by the title of elder, in various aspects of his life Noah clearly serves as a model for godly eldership for subsequent generations.

In the Patriarchal narratives, biological connections continue to provide the context for the development of biblical leadership along the lines of elders, though we can note a few deviations from the expected eldership pattern. Most notable among those deviations is the assumption of leadership, most often seen in terms of covenantal preference, by those who are chronologically younger, and these exceptions save biblical eldership from becoming a matter of rigid determinism and preserve the sovereignty of God in graciously ordaining those whom he will to serve as leaders.³ Nevertheless, in most of these deviations from chronological eldership, there is not a complete overthrow of the element of deference to greater longevity. For example, Jacob may be destined to

³ Most common among these exceptions is the preference of a younger brother over his elder brother(s), beginning with that of Abel over Cain, a spiritual preference that Cain cannot thwart even by murdering Abel, since the later born Seth heads the lineage that is identified as the godly line.

be leader over his older brother Esau, but he does not supplant his father Isaac. In like manner, despite his political power and elevated social position, not to mention the literal obeisance of his older brothers, Joseph never takes the place of his father Jacob as head of the family and clan, but rather defers to him even in the blessing of Joseph's own sons.⁴

Continuing the mainstream of the biblical idea of elder leadership, there is an underscoring in the patriarchal narratives of the element of identification of leaders with those who follow them, even in succeeding generations. The decisions of leaders are demonstrated to be influential not only when those decisions are made directly on behalf of others, as when Abraham directs the choosing of a wife for Isaac, but also when decisions influence by example, as when Isaac copies his father's lies concerning his wife. Any consideration of elder leadership in the patriarchal narratives should also note that there are hints of a broader than biological grouping in the expansion of the households led by elder figures to include large numbers of servants and slaves. The most

⁴ Ken Whitson, friend of the writer, pointed out a title used of Joseph that bears mention here. In 45.8, as he reveals himself to his brothers he states “[God] has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt.” This use of בָּאֵב (father) seems to parallel two instances in Judges (17.10; 18.19) where a Levite is invited to serve as “our father and priest” to a family and then a clan, and two instances of Elisha’s being called “my father” by kings Jehoram and Joash (Second Kings 6.21; 13.14). In all three settings, the term בָּאֵב is clearly conveying a significant respect for the person to whom it is applied, and it is interesting to note that all three occurrences involve the providing of counsel and guidance by the one called בָּאֵב. Since a biological fatherhood is not the case in any of these usages, a metaphorical use is intended. Joseph is acting in the manner of a father to pharaoh by providing guidance, and in that respect is leading pharaoh himself (and all Egypt) as a father would lead his clan. Jehoram looks to Elisha for direction when making an important decision, as a son would defer to his father for direction; Joash looks to Elisha for final blessing as a son would do with a father who is about to die. The instances in Judges seem to fit this idea of a בָּאֵב as one who provides counsel and guidance as well. All of these uses of בָּאֵב for one in a position of trusted leadership fit well with the basic idea of leading by the elder, since a father is by definition one who is an older leader. Patriarchal leadership is elder leadership.

prominent example here would be Abraham's aged servant whom he dispatches as his proxy in finding a wife for Isaac. The piety of the servant that is emphasized in the narrative at this point clearly speaks to Abraham's role as not merely a social elder, but an elder in a spiritual sense, one who has led him in faith in Yahweh. This broadening of the biblical understanding of the identity of God's chosen people is explicitly pointed to in the promise that Abraham's seed will bless all peoples of the earth, making him father and spiritual elder to all ethnicities.⁵

Interestingly, even as the Mosaic and conquest periods introduce a time of two successive powerful national leaders, the narrative includes many more references to "lesser" elders among the Israelites. It is to the elders of Israel that Moses is first to go when he is commissioned by God, and it is in the company of the elders that he is to confront the pharaoh.⁶ It is the elders who lead in the institution of the Passover, it is the elders who stand with Moses when he strikes the rock, and it is with the elders that Moses and Aaron attend a sacrificial meal with Jethro.⁷ It is before the elders that Moses presents the covenantal law, and seventy of the elders sit with Moses, Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu when they see God and eat and drink in his presence.⁸ The elders are even

⁵ An interesting usage of the term *elder* occurs in the Joseph narratives. In Genesis 50.7, the narrative tells us that all the elders of the Egyptians accompanied Joseph for the burial of his father. This usage would seem to point to an understanding of the term beyond the idea of mere age, since it would hardly seem the intent of the narrative that all the Egyptian elderly went on the journey. "All the elders of the land of Egypt" must therefore refer to some recognized leadership, perhaps a class of individuals who served in some advisory role, a common feature of Eastern ruling structures even down to the first incursions of Western powers into the area.

⁶ Exodus 3.16, 18.

⁷ Exodus 12.21; 17.5, 6; 18.12.

⁸ Exodus 19.7; 24.9-11.

involved in important sacrificial offerings.⁹ Perhaps most significant for the role of the elders is the episode in Numbers chapter eleven where Yahweh invests seventy of the elders with his Spirit, for the purpose of preparing them to share in the official leadership of the nation under the direction of Moses. In the theocracy, of course, this elder leadership has both social and spiritual dimensions. Deuteronomy, with its anticipation of the settlement in the land of Canaan, speaks of the elders as continuing in positions of leadership, and under Joshua during the conquest, they continue to have significant roles.¹⁰ In a testimony to their faithfulness, the narrative tells us that Israel served Yahweh after Joshua's death "all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua."¹¹ It seems evident that despite the major roles played by Moses and his successor Joshua, the elders of Israel were vital to the life and well-being of the nation.

The narratives of Judges, Ruth, and First and Second Samuel provide ample testimony that, just as anticipated in Deuteronomy, elders continue to play significant roles in the life of Israel during its existence as a confederation of tribes.¹² In fact, it may well be that during this period between the dynamic personal leadership provided by Moses and Joshua and the personally focused leadership provided by the monarchy, the eldership of Israel formed the primary fabric that maintained the limited degree of social and spiritual order that survived the chaotic years of successive charismatic leaders

⁹ Leviticus 4.15; 9.1ff.

¹⁰ Deuteronomy 19.12; several references in chapters 21, 22, and 25; and Joshua 7.6; 8.10.

¹¹ Joshua 24.31; Judges 2.7.

¹² See Judges 11 and 21.16; Ruth 4; and First Samuel 4.3; 8.4; 11.3; 15.30; 16.4; 30.26.

known as judges. Elders, it may be assumed, would have provided for the day to day governance of the towns and their surrounding villages, and the tribal elders provided the closest thing to national guidance through temporary conclaves such as that mentioned in Joshua 21.16.

Eldership in Israel continues as a central institution even after the establishment of the monarchy. After a period of silence during the increasingly tyrannical rule of Saul, references to elders resurface during the time of David. Indeed, it is the elders who make covenant with David and anoint him as king.¹³ Elders continue to be spoken of as having significant roles and on occasion, influence upon kingly decision-making, even into the period of the divided kingdom.¹⁴ As was the case during the settlement of Canaan, it is most probably the elders of cities and towns that oversee legally binding contracts and administer justice at the local level, as well as at the tribal level, though inter-tribal gatherings of elders would have been rare. That such gatherings could have religious as well as social purposes in view seems implied by the presence of elders in sackcloth with King David as he made confession and intercession for the nation, and by references made by the prophet Joel.¹⁵

Exile does not obliterate the office of elder among the Israelites in the Babylonian Captivity. Indeed, for a people who were forcibly relocated *en masse*, it is to be expected that there would be a natural tendency to seek to replicate native societal and religious

¹³ Second Samuel 3.17; 5.3.

¹⁴ Second Samuel 17.4, 15; 19.11; First Kings 8.1, 3; 20.7-8; Second Kings 10.1, 5; 23.1.

¹⁵ First Chronicles 21.16; Joel 1.14; 2.16.

structures in a strange land. We are not surprised, then, when Ezekiel's prophetic messages are delivered in the presence of elders, perhaps even at a formally called gathering.¹⁶

So, too, eldership continues as a significant institution when the Israelite exiles return to Canaan. Now we see the specific designation "elders of the Jews" appear in the narrative text, probably reflecting both the reduced population and the fading of tribal identification as Jewish national identity comes more to the foreground.¹⁷ As towns and cities are re-inhabited, local eldership is resumed as well for the administration of legal matters of local concern.¹⁸

During the time of Jesus' earthly ministry, community leadership continues to be in the hands of elders, and eldership is an established fixture of national religious and social life, with elders spoken of alongside priests and scribes.¹⁹ From among these groups came the men who made up the Sanhedrin, which some Jewish scholars trace back to the seventy elders chosen to assist Moses and the court established by Jehoshaphat.²⁰ Though limited in scope of oversight by their Roman occupiers, the elders, along with the priests and scribes, clearly function as the highest Jewish authority of that time. As reflected in Luke's historical narratives, this state continues during the

¹⁶ Ezekiel 8.1; 14.1; 20.1, 3.

¹⁷ Ezra 5.5; 6.7, 14; 10.8.

¹⁸ Ezra 10.14; also seen in the extra-canonical Judith 6.16.

¹⁹ Matthew 16.21; 27.41; Mark 11.27; Luke 20.1.

²⁰ Numbers 11.16; Second Chronicles 19.8.

early years of the Church.²¹ Alongside these practices, the synagogue came into widespread use, both within Judea and among the diaspora, with a group of elders as the governing body for each local synagogue, along with individual offices such as synagogue ruler, which were probably filled by persons chosen from among the elders.

It is with this extensive history as background that the use of the term elder in the context of the Church appears.²² This use is to be expected, given the fact that the first believers in Christ are Jews and the Hebrew Scriptures are their sacred text. As they begin to gather for worship and fellowship as distinct followers of Christ, they naturally order their regular meetings along the lines of, though not identical to, Jewish synagogues.²³ It is no surprise then, that the concept of elders, so much a part of the life of God's people prior to Christ's ministry on earth, continues to be important among the people of God in the new covenant community.

In the New Testament, then, the term *elders* is used both in reference to leaders of the Jewish community and as a designation for the leaders of the Christian Church, with only a few instances of generic usage of the Greek terms that may be interpreted as

²¹ Acts 4.5, 8, 23; 6.12.

²² Acts 11.30; 14.23, 15.2, etc.

²³ Note that James uses the term συναγωγὴν (synagogue) to refer to a church gathering in 2:2.

nothing more than an indication of a person's chronological age.²⁴ Indeed, in the idealized and figurative images of the elect of all ages, it is elders that represent and lead the redeemed in worship - not priests, nor bishops, nor kings, nor any of the other biblical figures that might be expected.²⁵ (The elders of Revelation are said to be twenty-four in number, which clearly portrays the coming together of believers of both covenants, with twelve being the number of Israel's tribes and twelve the number of apostles whom Jesus chooses when he constitutes the Church as the new Israel.)

Taking biblical revelation as a whole, it is indeed impossible not to conclude that the concept of eldership is integral to a biblical theology of God's governance of his people through human leaders. No term of reference to earthly leaders so effectively bridges the biblical record of God's progressive revelation through salvation history. Any theology of church polity and leadership must of necessity carefully consider the role of elders, but the place and practice of the ministry of elders has been much debated in the course of church history, and indeed, it may be said that the crux of arguments over the structure and ministry of the Church revolves around how eldership is viewed. What is the place and purpose of elders in the Church today? To answer that question, it is

²⁴ Uses of πρεσβυτέρων (elder, neuter noun) and πρεσβύτερος (elder, adjective) in reference to Jewish leaders are seen in Matthew 15:2; 16:21; 21:23; 26:3, 47, 57; 27:1, 3, 12, 20, 41; 28:12; Mark 7:3, 5; 8:31; 11:27; 14:43, 53; 15:1; Luke 7:3; 9:22; 20:1; 22:52, 66; Acts 4:5-6; 4:8, 23; 6:12; 22:5; 23:14; 24:1; 25:15. Uses of πρεσβυτέρων (neuter noun) and πρεσβύτερος (adjective) in reference to Christian leaders are seen in Acts 11:30; 14:23; 15:2, 4, 6, 22, 23; 16:4; 20:17; 21:18; First Timothy 4:14; 5:17, 19; Titus 1:5; James 5:14; First Peter 5:1 (2), 5 (possibly a generic usage); Second John 1:1; Third John 1:1; Revelation 4:4, 10; 5:5, 6, 8, 11, 14; 7:11, 13; 11:16; 14:3; 19:4. Uses of πρεσβυτέρων (elder, neuter noun), πρεσβύτερος (elder, adjective), πρεσβύτης (elder, masculine noun), and πρεσβύτιδας (elderess, archaic feminine noun) in generic reference to age are seen in Luke 1:18; 15:25; John 8:9; Acts 2:17; Titus 2:2, 3; Philemon 1:9, and possibly First Peter 5:5.

²⁵ Revelation 4:4, 10; 5:5, 6, 8, 11, 14; 7:11, 13; 11:16; 14:3.

necessary to look more specifically at New Testament teaching and its application in ecclesiology.

New Testament narrative and teaching are most plainly read to support the existence of recognized and ongoing roles for those who serve as leaders of the Church. The apostles, of course, serve in the distinct role given to them by Christ, but there is no indication in the New Testament writings that the Apostles were to have successors designated for their offices when they died. There are those who argue for an office of pastor on the basis of Ephesians 4:11. This is, however, the only occurrence of the term ποιμένα (pastor, or more properly shepherd) in the New Testament, and nowhere are there qualifications or duties set forth for ποιμένα (shepherd) as there are for ἐπισκόποις (overseer) and διακόνοις (deacon). In addition, most of those who argue for *pastor* here as a church office would at the same time deny that the other terms in the same grammatical series in Ephesians 4:11 designate church offices.²⁶

We are left, then, with just two categories of leaders that are expected to serve within local churches: ἐπισκόποις (overseer) and διακόνοις (deacon). A clear reference to these is found in the greeting of the epistle to the church in Philippi: “Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”²⁷ That there would be some third category of leadership that Paul is ignoring in

²⁶ The reading of the Greek text is καὶ αὐτὸς ἔδωκεν τοὺς μὲν ἀποστόλους τοὺς δὲ προφήτας τοὺς δὲ εὐαγγελιστάς τοὺς δὲ ποιμένας καὶ διδασκάλους (And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers,).

²⁷ Philippians 1:1-2

his greeting is inconceivable. As another example, when Paul instructs Timothy on the selection of leaders among the Ephesian believers, he outlines qualifications for the offices of ἐπίσκοποις (overseer) and διάκόνοις (deacon). These instructions are immediately followed by Paul's statement "I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth."²⁸ This statement implies a comprehensiveness to his instructions that would make it strange for him to have left out some third office that ought to exist in an established church.

Despite such clear meaning in these texts, the question of a two *vs* a three fold view of church leadership arose early in the Church's history, and it is essentially answers to this question that have produced three main views of church government that influence thinking about the role of elders today. On the one hand, the congregational position most simply conceived advocates only two offices - elders and deacons, and on the other end of the spectrum, the episcopal position sees three offices - bishops, elders, and deacons. Between the congregational and episcopal doctrines is situated the presbyterian view that sees two offices, elder and deacon, but divides elders into two orders - teaching and ruling. For the moment, the question of whether this distinguishing among *types* of elders will be set aside, and priority given to the more basic two *vs* three office debate.

²⁸ First Timothy 3:14-15

There is virtually unanimous consent that the office of *πρεσβύτερος* (elder) within local churches is established by New Testament teaching, so the key question is the interpretation of the term *ἐπίσκοπος*, variously translated *overseer* or *bishop*²⁹. Once again, however, a plain reading of the biblical text brings clarity. First of all, it is clear that *ἐπίσκοπος* (overseer) and *πρεσβύτερος* (elder) are used interchangeably in both narrative and epistolary texts. In Acts 20, the narrative tells the reader that Paul arrived at Miletus and sent to Ephesus for the *πρεσβυτέρους τῆς ἐκκλησίας* (elders of the church).³⁰ What follows is Paul's moving address to those elders, in which he specifically addresses them as *ἐπισκόπους...τὴν ἐκκλησίαν* (overseers...of the church).³¹ In Paul's epistle to Titus, he reminds the younger man of his responsibility to set in place *πρεσβυτέρους* (elders), and Paul proceeds to outline the qualifications for those men, speaking of them in the singular as *τὸν ἐπίσκοπον* (the overseer).³² Peter demonstrates the same usage, exhorting those who are elders (*πρεσβυτέρους*) to oversee, or watch over (*ἐπισκοποῦντες*) the flock of God.³³ No New Testament text distinguishes between the terms *πρεσβύτερος*

²⁹ The King James and Revised translations prefer *bishop*; the New American, New International, and English Standard versions use *overseer*. The term derives from the verb *ἐπισκέπτομαι*, which gives the meaning of looking with the intent of examination or care. It is in this sense that the verb occurs twice in Acts 15:36: “And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, ‘Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are.’” Notably, it is used of God’s “visiting” his people with salvation in Luke 1:68, 78; 7:16; Acts 15:14; and Hebrews 2:6. Never is the verb used in the sense of ruling or governing, but always with the connotations of personal caring and concern.

³⁰ Acts 29:17

³¹ Acts 29:28

³² Titus 1:5, 7

³³ First Peter 5:1-2 In this text, *ἐπισκοποῦντες* stands in parallel construction with *ποιμάνατε*, shepherd (the same term from which *pastor* is derived).

(elder) and ἐπίσκοπος (overseer) in regards either to their qualifications or their responsibilities. Nowhere in the New Testament is there a mention of three offices - πρεσβυτέρους (elder), ἐπίσκοπος (overseer), and διάκονος (deacon) - together in the same text. The conclusion from a plain grammatical reading of the New Testament is clear: there are two ongoing church offices, ἐπίσκοπος (overseer), also known as πρεσβυτέρους (elder), and διάκονος (deacon).

Early non-canonical writings give evidence of the early Church's application of a two office view of church leadership. For example, the *Didache* may be cited for its mandate of the election of elders and deacons in language that supports a view of simple congregational government functioning through only two offices: ἐπίσκοπος (overseer) and διάκονος (deacon).³⁴ Qualifications for the two offices are described in the same terms and both are said to render service to the believers, and also to be honored as are prophets and teachers. While there is debate regarding the document's original dating and in what way it may be said to derive from the Apostles, it is clearly a window into Christian practice at a very early stage of Church history.³⁵ The *Epistle of Clement* may

³⁴ The *Didache (Teaching)* is an early Christian writing that presents itself as "The Lord's Teaching through the Twelve Apostles to the Nations, and it provides a summary of Christian faith and practice.

³⁵ The relevant passage in the *Didache* (15.1-2) reads: "Χειροτονήσατε οὖν ἑαυτοῖς ἐπισκόπους καὶ διακόνους ἀξίους τοῦ κυρίου, ἄνδρας πραεῖς καὶ ἀφιλαργύρους καὶ ἀληθεῖς καὶ δεδοκιμασμένους: ὑμῖν γὰρ λειτουργοῦσι καὶ αὐτοὶ τὴν λειτουργίαν τῶν προφητῶν καὶ διδασκάλων. 2. μὴ οὖν ὑπερίδητε αὐτούς: αὐτοὶ γὰρ εἰσὶν οἱ τετμημένοι ὑμῶν μετὰ τῶν προφητῶν καὶ διδασκάλων." (Choose [or ordain], therefore, for yourselves overseers and deacons, capable before the Lord, men who are meek, not loving money, trustworthy and well proven, for their service to you is the service of prophets and teachers. Do not despise them, for they are those to be honored by you with the prophets and teachers.) "The Apostolic Fathers I Clement · II Clement Ignatius · Polycarp Didache · Barnabas the Shepherd of Hermas the Martyrdom of Polycarp the Epistle of Dionetus," Christian Classics Ethereal Library, accessed April 22, 2014, <http://www.ccel.org/cCEL/lake/fathers2.v.html>.

also be adduced for a two office view that includes the terms ἐπίσκοπος (overseer) and διάκονος (deacon).³⁶

At the same time, it is argued that it is also quite early in Church history that we see first reference to a “monarchical bishop.” For example, the letters of Ignatius, bishop of Antioch in Syria, written about AD 115, exhort the churches to whom he writes to honor and submit to “the bishop” of their respective congregations. He also mentions elders and deacons as serving in harmony with the bishop and the church, but the bishop’s primacy is clear.³⁷ The use of *elder* (πρεσβυτέρους) and *bishop* (ἐπίσκοπος) as synonymous terms is not unusual in the early Church fathers, however, even by Cyprian, who despite such usage advocated a three-office structure utilizing πρεσβυτέρους (elder), ἐπίσκοπος (bishop), and διάκονος (deacon).³⁸

This arrangement of three-fold offices of bishop, elder, and deacons, however, seems to have been viewed even by its early advocates as a development of custom, not a

³⁶ With reference to the Apostles, Clement writes: “κατα χωρας ουν και πολεις κηρυσσοντες καθισταν τας απαρχας αυτων, δοκιμασαντες τω πνευματι, εις επισκοπους και διακονους των μελλοντων πιστευειν.” (...thus preaching through countryside and city, they appointed their first fruits (*i.e.*, those first converted), proving them in the Spirit, to be bishops and deacons to those who afterward believed.) (*First Epistle*, 42.4) “The Apostolic Fathers I Clement · II Clement · Ignatius · Polycarp Didache · Barnabas the Shepherd of Hermas the Martyrdom of Polycarp the Epistle of Dionetus,” Christian Classics Ethereal Library, accessed April 22, 2014, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/lake/fathers2.ii.i.html>.

³⁷ As an example, see his letter *To the Ephesians*, 4.1: “Wherefore it is fitting that ye should run together in accordance with the will of your bishop, which thing also ye do. For your justly renowned presbytery, worthy of God, is fitted as exactly to the bishop as the strings are to the harp.” “The Apostolic Fathers I Clement · II Clement · Ignatius · Polycarp Didache · Barnabas the Shepherd of Hermas the Martyrdom of Polycarp the Epistle of Dionetus,” Christian Classics Ethereal Library, accessed April 22, 2014, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf01.v.ii.iv.html>.

³⁸ See his use in letters five and forty. Alexander Roberts et al., eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers Down to A.d. 325*, vol. 5, *Hippolytus, Cyprian, Caius, Novatian, Appendix* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 283, 319.

Scriptural mandate. Jerome, for one, is clear about this point both in his letters and in his biblical commentary. While addressing an argument concerning whether a bishop might rightly have married a second wife after his baptism, his first wife, married before he was baptized, having died, Jerome notes: “In both epistles [First Timothy and Titus] commandment is given that only monogamists should be chosen for the clerical office whether as bishops or presbyters. Indeed, with the ancients these names were synonymous, one alluding to the office and the other to the age of the clergy.”³⁹

On a separate occasion, Jerome writes in the context of rebuking those who elevate deacons “before presbyters, that is, before bishops”:

For when the apostle clearly teaches that presbyters are the same as bishops, must not a mere server of tables and of widows be insane to set himself up arrogantly over men through whose prayers the body and blood of Christ are produced? Do you ask for proof of what I say? Listen to this passage: “Paul and Timotheus, the servants of Jesus Christ, to all the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi with the bishops and deacons.” Do you wish for another instance? In the Acts of the Apostles Paul thus speaks to the priests of a single church: “Take heed unto yourselves and to all the flock, in the which the Holy Ghost hath made you bishops, to feed the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.” And lest any should in a spirit of contention argue that there must then have been more bishops than one in a single church, there is the following passage which clearly proves a bishop and a presbyter to be the same. Writing to Titus the apostle says: “For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain presbyters in every city, as I had appointed thee: if any be blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of riot or unruly. For a bishop must be blameless as the steward of God.” And to Timothy he says: “Neglect not the gift that is in thee, which was given thee by prophecy, with the laying on of the hands of the presbytery.” Peter also says in his first epistle: “The presbyters which are among you I exhort, who am your fellow-presbyter and a witness of the sufferings of Christ and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: feed the flock of Christ...taking the oversight thereof not

³⁹ Philip Schaff and Henry A. Wallace, ed. *Jerome: Letters and Select Works*. Cosmo Classics (New York, NY: Cosimo, 2007), 143. (Passage cited is from *Letter LXIX - To Oceanus*, ¶3.)

by constraint but willingly, according unto God." In the Greek the meaning is still plainer, for the word used is *επισκοποῦντες*, that is to say, overseeing, and this is the origin of the name overseer or bishop.⁴⁰

In this same letter, Jerome goes on to elaborate upon the origin of an individual bishop as "first among equals":

When subsequently one presbyter was chosen to preside over the rest, this was done to remedy schism and to prevent each individual from rending the church of Christ by drawing it to himself. For even at Alexandria from the time of Mark the Evangelist until the episcopates of Heraclas and Dionysius the presbyters always named as bishop one of their own number chosen by themselves and set in a more exalted position, just as an army elects a general, or as deacons appoint one of themselves whom they know to be diligent and call him archdeacon. For what function, excepting ordination, belongs to a bishop that does not also belong to a presbyter?⁴¹

It is clear, then, that Jerome recognizes no ground within the biblical text for a distinguishing between *ἐπίσκοπος* (overseer) and *πρεσβύτερος* (elder), and that he sees the election of a presiding presbyter/bishop (by the presbytery as a whole) as a practice added for the sake of expediency, namely the maintaining of church unity.

With deference to Jerome and Augustine, then, it would seem that the debate over a two or three office view centers on the degree of weight to be given to church custom. Two office advocates concede to three office advocates that monarchical bishops emerge very early in Church history, but the two sides differ on the significance of that fact. To perhaps oversimplify, those who hold to a three office view of the Church see the rise of bishops over elders as a valid and Spirit led manifestation of the Church's growth and development, while those who hold to a two office view see the same history as a

⁴⁰ Schaff, 288. (Passage cited is from *Letter CXLVI - To Evangelus*, ¶1.)

⁴¹ Schaff, 288-289.

regrettable deviation from biblical principles. It is not surprising, then, that we find many of the Reformers, as they affirm the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura*, moving away from a distinction between bishop and elder back to an identification of the two that leads them to a structure based upon a plurality of elders of equal authority. To the present day, the division of theologians on the number of church offices is largely, albeit not entirely, a reflection of the degree of weight ceded to Church tradition. For the writer, the plain reading of the New Testament texts are conclusive, taking absolute precedence over customary practice, so it is to be concluded that elders, with the aid of deacons, are to be considered as the rightful leaders of the Church as established by Christ and his Apostles.

Before continuing on from this point, however, it is necessary to deal with a variation of the two office view that sub-divides the office of elder, most notably the presbyterian custom of recognizing teaching elders and ruling elders. The biblical basis for distinguishing between elders who are teachers and elders who are rulers is extremely narrow, even as presented by its staunchest advocates. The single text that is said to specifically speak of two types of elders is First Timothy 5:17: “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.”⁴² It is said that in calling special attention to those who are working hard “in word (ἐν λόγῳ) and teaching,” Paul is making reference to a separate “teaching”

⁴² Interestingly, Edmund Clowney, Jr., a convinced presbyterian, interprets προεστῶτες here in the generic sense of “older men” as it is used earlier (5:1). See Edmund Clowney, “The Relation of Ministers to Ruling Elders,” *Theologia*, undated, accessed April 24, 2014, <http://www.hornes.org/theologia/edmund-clowney/the-relation-of-ministers-to-ruling-elders>. Most presbyterian scholars, however, would argue for the more technical use of the term here to indicate those holding the office of elder in a church.

category, in contrast to those elders who are “non-teaching.” (It is a bit of a misnomer to use the terms “teaching” and “ruling” to contrast these offices, since the presbyterian position assumes that teaching elders rule as well, so “teaching” and “non-teaching” would more accurately fit their interpretation of this text.) This view leads, however, to clear conflict with Paul’s listing of “the ability to teach” as a qualification to be met by a man chosen to be an elder.⁴³ Why list teaching as the one skill an elder should possess (all the other qualifications pertain to the man’s character and behavior), if there are to be some elders who do not teach but only rule? To discern in one subordinate clause the establishment of two different kinds of elders with all the distinctions made by presbyterians between clergy and laity today seems to be unwarranted by a plain reading of the text. The other passages commonly appealed to are the lists of gifts in Romans 12 and First Corinthians 12.⁴⁴ In these cases, it is argued that because teaching and ruling, along with other means of service, are listed as separate gifts, an elder might have the gift of ruling, but not of teaching. (One would assume that an elder in the presbyterian view must, or at least should, always have the gift of ruling.) The purpose of these listings of gifts is not for the delineation of offices, however, but for providing examples (not an exhaustive list) of Spirit-given means that believers use to build up the Church. Again, the plain reading of the qualifications for an elder in both First Timothy and Titus include the ability to teach sound doctrine, so the mention of gifts of teaching and ruling in contexts separate from any discussion of offices does not warrant the creation of separate

⁴³ First Timothy 3:2

⁴⁴ Romans 12:6-8; First Corinthians 12:8-10.

classes within the eldership. The paucity of New Testament textual support leads some to find a basis in the Old Testament for the distinguishing between teaching elders, or clergy, and ruling elders, or lay-elders. Thus *The Form of Presbyterial Church-Government* appeals to Second Chronicles 12:28 and 19:8-10 as support for its statement describing “Other Church-Governors”:

As there were in the Jewish church elders of the people joined with the priests and Levites in the government of the church; so Christ, who hath instituted government, and governors ecclesiastical in the church, hath furnished some in his church, beside the ministers of the word, with gifts for government, and with commission to execute the same when called thereunto, who are to join with the minister in the government of the church. Which officers reformed churches commonly call Elders.⁴⁵

All of these arguments are unconvincing from the standpoint of biblical exegesis, which, to summarize once again simply and plainly presents a view of churches as local gatherings of believers who were served by elders and deacons, with no distinctions made within either leadership group.

Inherent in the summation above is the plural nature of the eldership (and the diaconate as well). This is clearly reflected in fact that the plural *elders* is consistently used throughout the New Testament when the leadership of a local church is addressed. Speaking of Paul and Barnabas’ time in Derbe and their return through Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch the Acts narrative reads “And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had

⁴⁵ Assembly at Edinburgh, “The Form of Presbyterial Church-Government,” Center for Reformed Theology and Apologetics, undated, accessed April 24, 2014, <http://www.reformed.org/documents/index.html>.

believed.”⁴⁶ It is worth noting that these are newly established churches, composed of new converts, yet still it is the case that a plurality of elders is set up in each one. As noted above, Acts 29 describes Paul’s meeting with the elders of the Ephesian church. Add to this the mentions of multiple elders of a church in his epistles (nowhere is only one elder a of a church mentioned), and it is clear that Paul’s practice in planting churches was to ensure that each local church was served by a plurality of elders.

Subsumed in this picture of a plurality of elders in a local church—in all the New Testament references, whether in narrative or epistles—is an equality among those elders. This parity of elders among themselves naturally grows out of the doctrine of the lordship of Christ over his Church. Nowhere in Scripture does Jesus hand over his authority as Head of the Church to any individual. For shared ministry by a plurality of elders to have any real meaning, this principle of parity must be preserved. As soon as one elder is given predominance or veto power or an extra vote or any such thing, the principle of leadership by a plurality of elders is lost. The form and appearance may remain if several men retain the title of elder, but if in reality they are under submission to a single individual, then there is in truth no plurality of elders serving the church. The biblical model for leadership in a local church, then, is that Jesus Christ is the head of the church, and he gives to the church a plurality of elders serving in parity with one another to shepherd his people.

⁴⁶ Acts 14:23

Within the congregational heritage from which came the Conservative Congregational Christian Conference—the denominational affiliation of the churches whose pastors were surveyed for this project—this principle of a plurality of elders in leadership finds ample resonance. Congregationalists in colonial America presented with biblical references this doctrine in *The Cambridge Platform*, the work of elders and messengers assembled in synod in 1648. Making specific reference to *The Westminster Confession of Faith* of two years before, the preface to the platform judged it “very holy, orthodox, and judicious in all matters of faith,” dissenting “only in those things which have respect to church government and discipline.”⁴⁷ The platform recognizes first that supreme church power resides with the Lord Jesus Christ, but that there exists a subordinate, or ministerial power, and further says that there is an “extraordinary” ministerial power, as seen in the apostles, prophets, and evangelists, and an “ordinary” power, as resides in “every particular Congregational church.”⁴⁸ Describing the nature of this governing authority in the local church, the synod states:

Ordinary church power is either power of office--that is, such as is proper to the eldership--or power of privilege, such as belongs to the brotherhood. The latter is in the brethren formally and immediately from Christ--that is, so as it may, according to order, be acted or exercised immediately by themselves; the former is not in them formally or immediately, and therefore cannot be acted or exercised immediately by them, but is said to be in them, in that they design the persons unto office, who only are to act or to exercise this power.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Walker, Williston. *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1893), 195.

⁴⁸ Robert E. Davis, ed. *Historic Documents of Congregationalism*. (Millers Falls, MA: Puritan Press, 2005), 97.

⁴⁹ Davis, 98.

While distinguishing within the eldership those who are called as pastors and teachers to a special ministry of Word and sacrament, the platform sees all the elders joining together in “acts of spiritual rule” and lists several examples of such rule:

- I. To open and shut the doors of God's house, by the admission of members approved by the church; by ordination of officers chosen by the church and by excommunication of notorious and obstinate offenders renounced by the church, and by restoring of penitents forgiven by the church.
- II. To call the church together when there is occasion, and seasonably to dismiss them again.
- III. To prepare matters in private, that in public they may be carried an end with less trouble, and more speedy dispatch.
- IV. To moderate the carriage of all matters in the church assembled, as to propound matters to the church. To order the season of speech and silence, and to pronounce sentence according to the mind of Christ with the consent of the church.
- V. To be guides and leaders to the church in all matters whatsoever pertaining to church administrations and actions.
- VI. To see that none in the church live inordinately, out of rank and place without a calling, or idly in their calling.
- VII. To prevent and heal such offenses in life or in doctrine as might corrupt the church.
- VIII. To feed the flock of God with a word of admonition.
- IX. And, as they shall be sent for, to visit and pray over their sick brethren.
- X. And at other times, as opportunity shall serve thereunto.⁵⁰

This tradition was notably codified by congregationalists in England in *The Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order of 1658*.⁵¹ After specifying that “all power for the calling, institution, order, or government of the Church, is invested in a supreme and sovereign manner in the Lord Jesus Christ, as King and Head thereof,”⁵² the congregational

⁵⁰ Davis, 100.

⁵¹ The committee responsible for the text of this declaration included Thomas Goodwin, John Owen, Philip Nye, William Bridge, Joseph Caryl and William Greenhill.

⁵² *The Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order of 1658*, section titled The Institution of Churches, and the Order Appointed in Them by Jesus Christ, paragraph 1.

affirmation goes on to testify that Christ has called into being locally gathered churches to whom he has given “all that power and authority, which is any way needful for their carrying on that order in worship and discipline, which he hath instituted for them to observe, with commands and rules for the due and right exerting and executing of that power.”⁵³ Each particular church so formed is viewed as having received governing power directly from Christ, and there is no church more extensive beyond the bounds of the local church to which is entrusted any governing power.

Each local church is said to consist of officers and members, with the members possessing the freedom to choose from among themselves those who will serve as officers “to be over them, and to minister to them in the Lord.”⁵⁴ The document further specifies that

The officers appointed by Christ, to be chosen and set apart by the church so called, and gathered for the peculiar administration of ordinances, and execution of power and duty which he entrusts them with, or calls them to, to be continued to the end of the world, are pastors, teachers, elders and deacons.⁵⁵

The offices of pastor, teacher, and elder are treated together in the description of officer selection:

The way appointed by Christ for the calling of any person, fitted and gifted by the Holy Ghost, unto the office of pastor, teacher or elder in a church, is, that he be chosen thereunto by the common suffrage of the church itself, and solemnly set apart by fasting and prayer, with imposition of hands of the eldership of that church, if there be any before constituted therein. And of a deacon, that he be

⁵³ *The Savoy, the Institution of Churches*, paragraph 4.

⁵⁴ *The Savoy, the Institution of Churches*, paragraph 7.

⁵⁵ *The Savoy, the Institution of Churches*, paragraph 9.

chosen by the like suffrage, and set apart by prayer, and the like imposition of hands.⁵⁶

Pastors and teachers are viewed as those who have, by virtue of their office, the expectation to be ministers of the Word, but care is taken to specify that others not holding those offices may be gifted by the Holy Spirit and called to such ministry as well. While only those holding the offices of preaching and teaching may administer the sacraments, admission to church membership and excommunication are done on the authority of the church as a whole.⁵⁷

An atrophy of this leadership model incorporating a plurality of elders came about during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The roles of preacher and teacher seen in the seventeenth century statements were combined in the pastor, who gradually became “first among equals” in the eldership. The expansion of denominational structures and an increasing professionalism among pastors then hastened the diminishing of the role of elders. Eventually this resulted in most churches dropping the office of elder from their governing documents altogether, leaving only the pastor, singly or with a pastoral staff, and the deacons. While this may remain the norm for most congregationally governed churches today—including baptist churches, of course—an increased interest in Reformation doctrine has led in recent decades to a renewal of interest in the idea of leadership through a plurality of elders. In terms of the rewriting of the organizational documents, the change would not be great for most churches, but in terms of mindset, it

⁵⁶ *The Savoy*, the Institution of Churches, paragraph 11.

⁵⁷ Baptist churches of this time period likewise affirmed and practiced leadership through a plurality of elders. See, for a summary, Mark Dever’s “Baptists and Elders.”

would be radical, requiring a significant shift in thinking on the part of both pastors and congregations.

Congregationally governed churches, even those—or, perhaps, especially those—that are struggling to survive, are uniquely positioned to make this theological shift. Not by an invention of new forms or an adopting of practices from other traditions, but by a renewal of the historic forms of congregationalism will these churches be best served as they seek a renewal of life and health. At a time when so many of these churches are characterized by a spirit of individual autonomy in tension with pastors who tend to carry out their leadership roles in a solo fashion, there is an opportunity to come together to form a shared leadership through a plurality of elders that will have a transformative effect. Historically, it would be for those in the congregational tradition a re-application of the biblical mandate for elder-served churches that could lead to spiritual renewal.

CHAPTER THREE:

LITERATURE REVIEW

The young seminarian discovered the writings of a popular evangelical pastor early during his time juggling study, work, and family, and he was sure that he had found the biblical model for church leadership that he needed.¹ Theological and language study behind him a few years later, he began his first pastorate with enthusiasm and had as a primary goal the restructuring of the church in accordance with the leadership paradigm he had embraced. A small congregation with an attractive building in a picturesque New England town provided an ideal context for his vision, which he was sure would not only rejuvenate the membership but bring the numerical growth he and the pulpit committee had discussed during his interview.

As he introduced the leadership model, several church members became excited about it as well, agreeing with his argument for its biblical basis, and he wrote up summary notes for their continued study and application. Several weeks of preaching and teaching later, the young pastor began to take steps toward rewriting the church's organizational papers to reflect the leadership structure that he advocated, and it was at that point that he first heard of resistance to the idea on the part of some members. Momentum was on his side, however, and it seemed foolish to slow down the process in order to deal with a few people who were probably just opposed to change in general. Adoption of the new structure did not quiet the dissension, however, and as those in the

¹ The young seminarian here described is a fictional construct based upon the writer's experience and observation.

new leadership positions became acquainted with their roles, they had to deal with complaints and gossip.

Before many weeks had passed, some of the older members had ceased attending, but those who had embraced the new system tried to encourage the young pastor that it was for the best, and the church would grow. Visitors did come from time to time, but only a few new members were gained, and those numbers did not offset the loss of other members due to family moves and continued fall out from the changes made. By that time, there was no going back, however, and the pastor continued promoting his leadership model, even featuring it on the church website and writing about it in blogs. Despite some Sundays when everything seemed to go well, an undercurrent of concern persisted, and he even began to hear of criticism of his preaching, which the congregation seemed to like at the beginning. A core of folks remained supportive, however, and so the pastor soldiered on in his ministry.

Within a few years, the decline in congregational giving began to have serious implications, and leadership meetings became preoccupied with financial worries. The pastor and his leadership team were convinced that the issue was biblical faithfulness and stayed the course, cutting the budget to the bone and foregoing all but the most necessary building maintenance, as well as letting go any missionary giving. Special prayer meetings were held, and a few extra gifts in part bridged the gap, but the decline continued until even the leadership had lost hope for a turnaround. By this time, the pastor had developed some contacts for other possible ministries, and thinking it too

much to start over with a new pastor, the church membership sold the building to pay off debts and drifted to other congregations.²

The composite narrative presented above is a worse case scenario, but it is nevertheless true that the area of leadership development and growth is problematic for most pastors, and that reality is reflected in a pattern discernible in publications related to this area. Every church plant that grows into a large congregation presages a book in which the pastor tells others how to replicate the success. Greater sales will result if the pastor sponsors a conference or takes to the evangelical speakers' circuit, and a web presence will further this goal as well. If the pastor and his book attract enough attention, the leadership model he advocates becomes a paradigm adopted by pastors who overlook or minimize the fact that their ministry setting differs greatly from that in which the mega-church pastor began his work. This new leadership model, enthusiastically presented, may bring a degree of excitement to a smaller church, a sense of being part of something bigger and more successful, and it may even draw in some folks from other churches who hear of the change in program. What one can say with certainty, however, is that it will not replicate for the typical small church and her pastor the experience of success enjoyed by the mega-church. In most cases, the new program implemented will eventually be quietly shelved by the pastor himself, or by the church when he leaves, but for some congregations, the program will bring dissension and division that leads to a split, or even the death, of the local church. One pastor and commentator refers to

² The narrative of this and the preceding paragraphs is a composite creation, based on the writer's observations and personal acquaintance with actual church experiences.

congregations that succumb to the temptation to follow the latest popular writer or speaker as “fad driven churches.”³

Yet if one resists the temptation of following the latest publication celebrity, how does a pastor make profitable use of the plethora of resources addressing the topic of church leadership? With approaches to the topic coming from every conceivable viewpoint, study in this area like trying to drink from a fire hose. No pastor has the time to read all that is published related to church leadership, so he needs a filter that will capture out of the flow those resources that might prove helpful. The following discussion will make an attempt to provide such a filter for evangelical pastors of small to moderate churches. More specifically, since this paper’s project focused upon congregationally governed churches, pastors of churches so organized will be generally in view in the following discussion. Working within these parameters, the writer suggests that an overview of relevant literature will also be aided by discerning major themes on the topic of church leadership that may be of particular relevance to the pastors of smaller, congregationally governed churches. In the development of thought regarding church leadership within the broad stream of American evangelicism, three discernible trends seem of significance to the writer. These trends have reinforced and reacted to one another, and at the same time have reflected trends within the larger context of American culture. All three possess some degree of relevance to the church settings which this study has in view.

³ Todd Wilken, “The Fad-Driven Church,” *Issues, Etc.*, 2009, accessed March 18, 2015, <http://issuesetc.org/resources/FadDrivenChurch.pdf>.

The first trend to note here is an erosion of the centrality of denominations in the thinking of evangelical believers, although this trend was not, of course, confined to evangelicals alone. Nevertheless, the writer would suggest that this decline in the significance of denominational affiliation is a phenomenon that is perhaps inherent in the very conception of the idea of evangelicalism as an identifiable movement. Indeed, to identify oneself as an evangelical is in itself both an indication of the diminishment of a denomination identity and a contributing factor to that process. No longer is it enough in many people's minds to see themselves as simply a Congregationalist or a Methodist; for some time now, most feel it necessary to add to that appellation the adjective "evangelical." David Dockery cites the National Association of Evangelicals as an example of this phenomenon, stating that the NAE "pulled evangelicals into new networks, new alliances, and new ways of relating to one another, creating energy away from historical denominational entities. While people largely stayed within denominations, they related with one foot in the denomination and another foot planted outside the denomination."⁴ From many evangelicals' perspective, this change in personal orientation was a reaction to the drift of mainline denominations from orthodoxy: it was not a change in the beliefs of the evangelical Christian, but changes in the denomination's faith statements that make the term "evangelical" a necessary addition. In many circumstances, this process led eventually to wholesale separation from mainline

⁴ David S. Dockery, Ray Van Neste, and Jerry N. Tidwell, eds., *Southern Baptists, Evangelicals, and the Future of Denominationalism* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2011), 19.

denominations, not just by individual evangelical Christians, but by the departure of local congregations from the denomination, with or without church property.⁵

As their personal affirmation of evangelical doctrines became more important in their minds, the connections of evangelical Christians with a particular denomination, or even a particular local congregation, were weakened. This process is summarized by Stanley Grenz:

The postfundamentalist evangelical coalition that came into existence in the mid-twentieth century is by necessity transdenominational. In order to list support for the crucial tasks to which they sense themselves called—including defending orthodoxy in the face of the challenge of liberalism and neo-orthodoxy, and launching a bold new thrust in evangelism—our evangelical forebears needed to bring into the coalition persons of varying denominational loyalties. To this end, they followed the nineteenth-century model of voluntary societies and established a panorama of parachurch organizations. These facilitated their desire to circumvent the sticky issues of denominational polity that could so easily derail the evangelical program. But the move toward transdenominational voluntary societies also served to loosen the cords of denominational loyalty and even to lead some of the new organizations—against the initial intent of their founders—to function in quasi-church or quasi-denominational manners.⁶

Evangelical pastors began to develop relationships across denominational lines, and in many cases, those relationships took on significance equal to, or greater than, their formal denominational ministerial relationships. Dockery goes so far as to say “These new, interlocking [evangelical] networks, more than denominations, have formed and framed the center of Evangelicalism in this country over the past 60 years.”⁷ Evangelical

⁵ Years prior to his coming to them, all three of the congregational churches the writer has pastored in New Hampshire had in this fashion severed their affiliation with the United Church of Christ.

⁶ Stanley J. Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the 21st Century* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 175.

⁷ Dockery, 19.

Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians discovered that they had more in common with one another in terms of faith than they had in common with their liberal denominational fellows. As they came to know, and even to worship and pray with pastors of other denominations that shared their evangelical orientation, pastors gained personal awareness of church leadership patterns that differed from those with which they were familiar. Even when this did not lead to an immediate embrace of those new ideas, there usually developed a greater openness to differing viewpoints. This applied to lay evangelicals as well, rubbing shoulders with and sometimes serving in united ministries alongside evangelicals of other denominations.

This weakening of denominational identification was seen even in denominations that would be viewed as conservative. This effect meant that “[m]ost denominations, including the SBC [Southern Baptist Convention], were quite divided over whether this new Evangelicalism was helpful or harmful.”⁸ With the strengthening of evangelical consciousness among such believers, identifying themselves as evangelicals has become for many a more important element of their self-identification than their denominational affiliation. One way in which this is reflected is the fact that the leaders of evangelicalism have been in general recognized less and less frequently as representatives of particular denominations, to the point that many evangelicals would be hard pressed even to identify the specific denomination of the evangelical leaders they admire. Even for the writer growing up in a Southern Baptist environment, Billy Graham was rarely thought of

⁸ Dockery, 19.

a “Southern Baptist evangelist,” but rather was viewed as if he were an independent evangelical preacher working with evangelicals—and non-evangelicals—of many denominations. While there was some pride that he was “one of ours,” there was little denominational advocacy to be seen in Graham’s ministry, and he stayed largely aloof from denominational institutions and activities. Similar observations could be made about almost all of the recognized leaders of evangelicalism over the years.

This development did not, however, take place in isolation from the larger American culture, which has evidenced the same erosion of denominational identity. This process was already evident when Robert Wuthnow described it:

In the past century denominationalism was of course a very large part of what it meant to be a Christian. People were Baptists or Presbyterians as much as they were Christians. They were Catholics or Orthodox, and their Christian identity was inseparable from these traditions. But denominationalism has, as we know, declined in many ways. Fewer people remain in the denominations in which they were raised, fewer people think their own denomination has a better grasp on the truth than other denominations, and fewer denominations themselves impose creedal tests that people must meet in order to become members or participate in church services.⁹

Wuthnow’s description is affirmed by 2007 data from Pew Research:

More than one-quarter of American adults (28%) have left the faith in which they were raised in favor of another religion - or no religion at all. If change in affiliation from one type of Protestantism to another is included, 44% of adults have either switched religious affiliation, moved from being unaffiliated with any religion to being affiliated with a particular faith, or dropped any connection to a specific religious tradition altogether.¹⁰

⁹ Robert Wuthnow, *Christianity in the Twenty-First Century: Reflections On the Challenges Ahead* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 49.

¹⁰ “Religious Affiliation: Summary of Key Findings,” 2013, accessed March 19, 2015, Pew Research Center’s Religion and Public Life Project, <http://religions.pewforum.org/reports#>.

Alister McGrath makes reference to “the erosion of Protestant denominationalism” in his introductory text, where he states that in 1955

a Gallup poll showed that 96 percent of the adult population of the United States belonged to the same denomination as their parents. ... Yet by 1990 many of these mainline denominations were in decline and had lost between one fifth and one third of their 1965 memberships, at a time when the population growth of the United States had surged. A real numerical decline thus converted into a significant reduction in the proportion of America’s population associated with these denominations.¹¹

Russell Richey notes that the decline of denominationalism is reflected in the title itself of the book *Atlas of American Religion: the Denominational Era, 1776-1990*.¹² Richie sees five stages through which American Protestantism has moved, and calls the last stage “postdenominational confessionalism” because “denominations have lost or are losing long-familiar adhesive and dynamic principles and are groping, often desperately, for tactics that work and unite.”¹³

The decline in denominational loyalty continued to be documented statistically into the 21st Century. For example, Richard Yeakley reported in *USA Today* on figures from the *2011 Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches*:

The figures in the 2011 yearbook, compiled by churches in 2009 and reported to the council in 2010, show that mainline Protestant churches continue the decline in memberships that began in the 1970s. The newest numbers show that the membership drop in mainline churches led to a 1% decrease in total U.S. church membership, to 145.8 million. The Presbyterian Church (USA) led with the greatest membership drop of the 25 largest denominations, down 2.6%. Other

¹¹ Alister E. McGrath, *Christianity: An Introduction*, third ed. (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 216.

¹² Russell E. Richey, *Denominationalism: Illustrated and Explained* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013), 237.

¹³ Richey, 87.

denominations reporting declines include the United Methodist Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Episcopal Church as well as the more conservative Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.¹⁴

In New England towns like those with which the writer has been familiar for the past forty years, there has been a gradual atrophy of personal ties to those very institutions that seemed so dominant in the first half of the twentieth century. In retrospect, this erosion first showed itself in the mid-century drift of young people away from the churches that had been socially important to their grandparents and parents. Even for those younger people who continued some involvement in the churches of their forebears, denominational identification became less important as other social connections outside of churches grew in significance.

As these old mainline denominational churches began to decline, some local congregations chose to withdraw from their denominations to identify with smaller, more conservative denominations or to remain independent, local entities. Merger movements among liberal denominational leaders that had been envisioned as broadening their influence actually brought about a further lessening of denominational loyalties. The new merger denominations attracted little loyalty beyond those who personally benefited from those structures in some way. In addition, new churches were begun in New England by denominations strong in other regions of the country, especially the South, but by virtue of the fact that they were separated by distance from their denominational geographic strongholds, these church plants also tended to be less focused on denominational affairs.

¹⁴ Richard Yeakley, "Growth Stalls, Falls for Largest U.S. Churches," *USA Today*, February 15, 2011, accessed March 18, 2015, http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/religion/2011-02-16-church_growth_15_ST_N.htm#.

These new congregations tended not to identify themselves in terms of their denominations, because those denominational labels had little positive significance for their New England neighbors and communities, and sometimes such labels were seen as actual deterrents to reaching outsiders. Non-denominational church plants also began to appear. In almost all of these cases, even in the case of church members possessing high degrees of loyalty to their local congregation and its activities, there has been a lessening of loyalty or even interest in the denomination of which their church is a part.

The nature of this trend and its effects have been well-documented, but what is relevant for this paper is the impact this had on the theory and practice of church leadership. Informal leadership patterns and practices have always been a reality within churches, as in other voluntary associations, but in the heyday of denominational identities, formal leadership structures and functions were determined on the basis of denominational teaching and traditions, and there was often a close correlation between those formal structures and those that existed informally. The older men of influence in their communities tended to also be those who were elected to church offices.

With the weakening of denominational ties among laity and clergy alike, formal and informal leadership structures that had been in place for decades began to fragment. The growth of parachurch organizations may have indirectly reinforced this trend as well. Leadership patterns within parachurch structures differed greatly from the traditional forms found in evangelical churches, with parachurch organizations for the most part adopting leadership models borrowed from business and civic structures. For example,

boards of directors working with a president or executive director were common in such organizations, whether their goals were evangelism, education, missions, or relief and assistance work.¹⁵ Modern theories of leadership out of the American business world often seemed more applicable to parachurch structures and practices than the leadership structures of their own churches. Parachurch leadership quickly adopted concepts like organizational vision, the use of a mission statement, and tangible goal setting that had come to be widely used in business.

This is not by any means to imply that evangelical parachurch leaders devalued the Scriptures, but it was difficult for them to find in the Bible, for example, a leadership model for a relief organization or an association of youth groups. Elders and deacons, the traditional leadership models for churches, were unheard of among parachurch structures. This is not to be taken as a pejorative statement, since parachurch organizations are by definition not churches, and hence not necessarily to be governed in the same manner as churches. Nonetheless, the different leadership patterns of evangelical parachurch organizations were bound to have some cross-over effect on the theory and practice of evangelical church leadership. The overall tendency of this decline in reliance upon traditional denominational models for leadership was that when it came to actual church life, pastors and lay people alike began to feel more free to develop their own leadership

¹⁵ Examples could include virtually any parachurch organization, from a large enterprise like World Vision International to entities like Cru and Ligonier Ministries, down to a local soup kitchen.

patterns for their congregations, or to adopt principles and practices from elsewhere in the culture.¹⁶

A second trend that the writer suggests is relevant is the movement among evangelicals to empower the laity. As Gary McIntosh points out, this focus on laity was a key element of the church renewal movement that exploded in the 1960s.¹⁷ The laity movement characterized itself as an embracing of biblical ideas of the Church, at times overtly seeking to replicate New Testament patterns of relationships and reacting to traditional structures in American Christianity that were seen as antithetical to biblical norms. Key to the movement was an emphasis on personal relationships that reflected an egalitarianism among gatherings of believers. This pattern naturally conflicted, directly or indirectly, with the concept of an official leadership that had been the norm in American church life. The growth of the charismatic movement had a similar effect in its emphasis on practical leadership arising out of individual giftedness rather than structural leadership invested in an office established by the church.

This is not to say that these movements did not emphasize the headship of Christ over his Church; in fact, that doctrine was usually underscored. In practice, however, Christ' headship was seen as manifested directly through individuals irrespective of officially designated leadership positions, and this naturally encouraged, directly and

¹⁶ Specific examples of this trend will be provided in subsequent pages of this literature review chapter.

¹⁷ Gary McIntosh, “Church Movements of the Last Fifty Years in the USA,” 2015, accessed March 19, 2015, McIntosh Church Growth Network, <http://churchgrowthnetwork.com/free-resources/2010/08/20/church-movements-of-the-last-fifty-years-in-the-usa/>.

indirectly, the growth of an antiauthoritarian bias. Tom would assume leadership for the evening meeting of his small group Bible study or worship gathering, and it would not matter whether he was the pastor or not, or whether he had been ordained to an office of leadership by the church congregation. In a worship service, Emily would receive a word from God, and the leadership of the gathering would be tacitly given to her, even though the church had not recognized her as a church leader in any formal sense.¹⁸

The implications for views and practice of church leadership are easily discerned. Leadership came to be seen as a temporary endowment focused upon a particular function and detached from a particular office or a specific person of authority. Perhaps ironically, leadership also became less personal and relational, at least in the sense of personal relationships with a history that extended beyond the present experience. Such leadership clearly commanded less authority. Once Emily had finished delivering a word from God and Tom had completed his turn as small group leader, neither had any real ongoing leadership role with those who were present at the meeting. With some people, it was a relatively small step to an antiauthoritarian bias prejudicial to any authority resident in an established group within a local church. Was not everyone a leader in one way or the other? Why should one person's interpretation of the Bible be considered more authoritative than another's?

This antiauthoritarian bias had obvious connections with American sociological trends. Traditional authority structures of all manner of social institutions came under

¹⁸ The characters named are fictitious.

attack during the mid-twentieth century. With the decline of respect for offices of authority came an increase in the popularity of the gifted individual and the dominance of celebrity culture. Celebrities and gifted performers in whatever field they may be exercise authority over those whom they lead largely through the pull towards imitation. In such a culture, every individual is an authority unto themselves, and with the advent of the social media, every individual can become a pseudo-celebrity and pontificate as an authority on any topic. Evangelicals have their celebrities, too, and they may easily have more significance for individual believers than the persons in places of authority in the local churches those believers attend.

The third, and most recently manifested, trend to note is the renewal of interest in Reformed doctrine among evangelicals that has been observed in recent decades. The rise of this movement among evangelicals has been well documented, with even secular media taking some notice of it.¹⁹ This interest in Reformation theology has cut across denominational lines, drawing in adherents even from traditions that had been, in modern times at least, antithetical to Reformed thought. The writer recalls growing up in a Southern Baptist context where Calvinism, if it had to be mentioned at all, was viewed as unbiblically opposed to missions and evangelism, not to mention an affront to the love of

¹⁹ See, for example, the essay on renewed interest in Reformed teaching, included *Time* magazine's list of "Ten Ideas Changing the World Right Now" and the PBS episode "The New Calvinism" on the debate within the Southern Baptist Convention. David Van Biema, "The New Calvinism," *Time*, March 12, 2009, 1, accessed September 19, 2014, http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1884779_1884782_1884760,00.html. Robert Faw, "The New Calvinism," PBS, April 3, 2014, accessed September 19, 2014, <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2014/04/03/april-4-2014-new-calvinism/22607/>. (Clearly speaking as an outsider, Faw confuses the two categories of election as "chosen" and "frozen," rendering an image that might give a new meaning to the expression "when hell freezes over.")

God. By contrast, today it is possible to read that “nearly equal numbers of pastors in the Southern Baptist Convention consider their churches as Calvinist/Reformed as do Arminian/Wesleyan,” according a poll taken in 2012 by SBC’s own Lifeway publishing arm.²⁰ As the Reformed renewal movement has grown, it has taken in a significant swath of evangelical believers, and while it may not comprise a majority of evangelicals, its influence is perhaps greater than its numbers because of the high profile of many of its spokespersons from different denominations. It has, of course, been encouraged by those in the Reformed denominations that had remained committed to their roots, and in some instances, pastors influenced by the movement have led their churches to affiliate with such denominations, but that has not seemed to have been the case as a rule. This may in part be due to the fact that advocates of Reformed theology in both Baptist and Congregationalist denominations could see themselves not as introducing new doctrines, but as reaffirming the theology of those denominations as originally founded. Hence, for example, advocates of Reformed theology among Southern Baptists call themselves “Founders Ministries,” harking back to the first recognized confession of faith among Southern Baptists.²¹

To some extent, connections may be drawn between this Reformed renewal and the trends identified above. The breaking down of denominational walls facilitated the kind of cross-pollination among pastors of varied traditions that has come to characterize

²⁰ Russ Rankin, “SBC Pastors Polled On Calvinism and Its Effect,” Lifeway, June 19, 2012, accessed September 19, 2014, <http://www.lifeway.com/Article/research-sbc-pastors-polled-on-calvinism-affect-on-convention>.

²¹ The Founders Ministries website may be found at founders.org.

the Reformed renewal. “Together for the Gospel” and “The Gospel Coalition” are two of the more well known examples of connections among pastors of different denominations that have furthered interest in Reformed doctrine.²² The writer was an early participant in a grass-roots version of such connections in the New England Reformed Fellowship, a small gathering of pastors from Congregational, Presbyterian, and Baptist denominations.²³ Sharing an interest in the doctrines of grace, the group met together for the reading of papers and prayer, and also sponsored an annual conference featuring Reformed preaching and teaching that drew together pastors and laypeople alike from different denominations.²⁴ Examples of other such interdenominational pastors groups and conferences that actively promoted Reformed theology could be noted. The growth of parachurch organizations also turned to the benefit of a renewed interest in Reformed doctrine among evangelicals. R. C. Sproul’s parachurch organization, Ligonier Ministries, became one of the most visible manifestations of the Reformed renewal movement, but many smaller parachurch projects have appeared.²⁵ Spurgeon Gems and Other Treasures of God’s Truth, for example, is administered by a couple living in rural Texas who, through a prison ministry, mass mailings, and website, promote the sermons

²² Websites for the two groups are located at <http://t4g.org> and <http://thegospelcoalition.org>, respectively.

²³ At its beginning, the group called themselves the Southern New England Reformed Fellowship, but dropped the first word of the name, it was joked, because their children overheard the acronym SNERF and thought their fathers were attending a Smurf meeting. Of course, NERF doesn’t have a particularly serious tone, either, but the fellowship of this group has been a great encouragement for the writer.

²⁴ New England Reformed Fellowship’s website is at <http://newenglandreformedfellowship.org>.

²⁵ Ligonier Ministries’s website is at <http://www.ligonier.org>.

and writings of C. H. Spurgeon.²⁶ Even the trend towards an antiauthoritarian bias may be reflected to some extent in the Reformed renewal, especially those elements that came to be identified as “young, restless, and reformed.”²⁷ Many of those identifying with the Reformed renewal did so by consciously breaking with the theology of the communities in which they had first come to faith. Again, the writer offers himself as an example. He came to Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary having made the decision to step outside the Southern Baptist tradition in which he had been converted and served, even though an SBC seminary would have been much less expensive. It was within the Gordon-Conwell community that the writer and his wife were introduced to and embraced the doctrines of grace.

Published evangelical thought addressing the topic of church leadership reflects the above named three trends: denominational distinctives are no longer paramount and there is an openness to different leadership models, authority is no longer accepted without question, and Reformed theology has greater influence. These trends may also be reflected in the pastor reader’s own thought and in the life of the congregation he serves, so it may be helpful to keep them in mind when making a survey of literature in the field of church leadership. The following overview of significant books and other publications that show this development is therefore offered with the hope that it will be a helpful

²⁶ Emmett O'Donnell administers the website “Spurgeon Gems and Other Treasures of God's Truth,” at <http://spurgeongems.org>, and mails out free copies of Spurgeon's sermons.

²⁷ The writer believes this term originated with a the title of an article in *Christianity Today* magazine. Collin Hansen, "Young, Restless, and Reformed," *Christianity Today*, September, 2006, accessed September 19, 2014, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2006/september/42.32.html>.

background for pastors seeking to sharpen and articulate their own thinking relative to church leadership, and that it may also assist them in understanding the existing leadership patterns of the specific pastoral setting where they serve.

Most readers of this study will themselves already have come to a particular view of church governance, but the pastor desiring to conduct a review of his seminary study of church polity in different traditions would find helpful two books, both published in 2004, that use a debate-like presentation. Zondervan's *Who Runs the Church?: 4 Views On Church Government* presents evangelical viewpoints on episcopal, presbyterian, single-elder congregational, and plural-elder congregational view of church leadership.²⁸ Broadman's *Perspectives On Church Government: Five Views of Church Polity*, perhaps reflecting its Baptist perspective, has its baptist contributors differentiate between single elder, plural elder, and “democratic” congregationalism.²⁹ Most readers will probably find the critiques made by the authors of the other authors' positions the more interesting reading in these books. Broadman's volume more than hints at places to the ongoing debate within the Southern Baptist Convention over the issue of eldership.

The pastor reader within an evangelical and congregational ministry environment will find it worthwhile to consider the seventeenth century roots of that particular tradition, all the more so since recent trends have in a sense led full circle back to them. Key documents here will be *The Cambridge Platform of Faith and Discipline* and *The*

²⁸ Chad Owen Brand and R. Stanton Norman, eds., *Perspectives On Church Government: Five Views of Church Polity* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2004).

²⁹ Steven Cowan, et al., *Who Runs the Church?: 4 Views On Church Government* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004).

*Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order.*³⁰ *The Cambridge Platform* is the product of a synod called at the request of the Massachusetts General Court, and the writer is tempted to say that the benefits derived from this request outweigh in positive value anything that has come out of the Massachusetts Court in recent decades. Given this opportunity, the Puritan colonists were a few steps ahead of their mother country counterparts in outlining the essentials of congregational church government. *The Cambridge Platform*, along with *The Savoy Declaration*, published in the home country two years later, provide a well written presentation of what may be called classical congregational church order. *The Savoy Declaration* has the advantage of composition by over one hundred Christians from many different independent English churches, and its view of the structure of church leadership is more developed. It is well worth consideration by church leaders today.³¹

Both *The Cambridge* and *The Savoy*, it is interesting to note, come out of a time when one may see elements of the modern trends discussed above. For instance, seventeenth century English culture was characterized by significant cross-denominational connections, both formally and informally, among leaders whom we would today recognize as evangelical. In addition, there was in that context a willingness among clergy and laity alike to break with accepted authorities and traditions when it was

³⁰ Both documents are widely available online and in print versions, including modernized language editions. The writer recommends a fine modern English edition of *The Savoy Declaration* done by Matthew Jolley, British pastor and graduate of London Theological Seminary, available as of this writing through lulu.com.

³¹ See the earlier chapter addressing theological considerations for a summary of the views of these documents.

deemed necessary, even at significant personal cost. During this same time period, there was in many quarters a strong affirmation of Reformed theology. These similarities add to the relevance of *The Cambridge* and *The Savoy* for pastors today, though of course it must be said that their truths have timeless value.³²

Also from the seventeenth century, and with relevance today in the context of conversations among evangelicals who are congregationalists, presbyterians, and episcopalians is Puritan Richard Baxter's *The Cure of Church-Divisions*.³³ Almost any pastor would be able to relate through personal experience to his subtitle: *Directions to Weak Christians, to keep them from being Dividers, or Troublers of the Church With some Directions to the Pastors, how to deal with such Christians*. Baxter's extended essay is relevant to this study for its presentation of his thoughts concerning the benefits of a plurality of local church elders, their qualifications, and the nature of their authority. In keeping with his conciliatory nature, he seeks to construct an understanding of church governance that will offer something of a compromise among congregationalists, presbyterians, and episcopalians for the sake of the peace of the Church. Whether he is successful in that effort may be debatable, but his address to pastors and church members is certainly worthy of consideration.

³² An example of a contemporary organization advocating continuing use of these historic documents is the Reformed Congregational Fellowship. The RCF annually sponsors a conference at which are presented papers by member pastors that address questions of a theological and pastoral nature related to *The Savoy*. The RCF website is reformedcongregational.org.

³³ Baxter's essay was originally published in 1670, and was combined by Francis Asbury for publication in 1849 with Jeremiah Burrough's work *Causes, Evils, Cures of Heart and Church Divisions*. It is available in various formats online and in facsimile.

Among the churches of that time period to which many American evangelicals trace their heritage, church leadership was largely envisioned as based upon the biblical offices of elder and deacon, but the heirs of those churches did not continue unswervingly on that path. By the nineteenth century, churches led by a plurality of elders were becoming less and less common. For most congregations, the office of elder was reduced essentially to that of the pastor serving as the sole elder, with deacons continuing in a supporting role to him. For example, John Angell James' *Christian Fellowship: Or, the Church Member's Guide*, published in 1831, treats this practice as an accepted norm.³⁴ This practice became the customary structure for most congregationally governed churches during the development of the denominations that were dominant by the mid-twentieth century in America. The four trends discussed above in this paper made their appearance in the context of this sole pastor/elder and deacons leadership tradition, and three published schools of thought may be discerned during the decades that saw the development of those trends.

The first of these three for discussion here has been present within the evangelical movement from its beginnings, but not always at the movement's center: the view of leadership maintained by the more conservative elements of the traditional Reformed denominations. For a readable, but thorough and thoughtful presentation of church leadership through the offices of elder and deacon, Edmund Clowney's *Living in Christ's*

³⁴ John Angell James, *Christian Fellowship: Or, the Church Member's Guide*. ed. Gordon T. Booth (Oswestry, Shropshire: Quinta Press, 1997).

*Church*³⁵ is among the best for the pastor or lay reader. Written as a study guide for local churches, it is excellent for setting out the role of elders and deacons in the context of the life of a congregation. What limits its use, perhaps, for congregationally governed churches is the fact that it is clearly presbyterian in outlook, though most of what Clowney has to say would be well received in any evangelical church. Somewhat more practically focused and less overtly presbyterian in presentation are two volumes written by laymen in the Christian Reformed Church: *The Elders Handbook: a Practical Guide for Church Leaders*³⁶ and *The Deacons Handbook: a Manual of Stewardship*.³⁷ Authors Berghoef and DeKoster lay out an understanding of the biblical foundations and life application of the ministry of a plurality of elders and deacons as leaders of a local congregation. Written with a lay audience in mind, these volumes add many specific guidelines for service in areas like the visitation of the sick and oversight of church finances. Berghoef and DeKoster's approach is strong on common sense advice that builds on biblical principals. Those new to the concept of plural eldership will find them of special help, especially those who are asking what serving as an elder looks like in terms of daily application. These books and Clowney's are among the best and most accessible in terms of readability from evangelical publications out of the traditional Reformed denominations. As noted at the beginning of this paragraph, this close

³⁵ Edmund P. Clowney, *Living in Christ's Church* (Philadelphia, PA: Great Commission Publications, 1986).

³⁶ Gerard Berghoef and Lester de Koester, *The Elders Handbook, a Practical Guide For Church Leaders* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian's Library Press, 1979).

³⁷ Gerard Berghoef and Lester DeKoster, *The Deacons Handbook: a Manual of Stewardship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian's Library Press, 1980).

association with Reformed churches meant that these publications were often off the radar of evangelicals of other denominations, but they may still be a helpful resource to readers who are not affiliated with a Reformed church.

Within that larger body of evangelicals from non-Reformed churches, publications began to appear during the same time frame as those just mentioned among thinkers less denominationally focused and more in tune with the laity renewal movement. This movement led away from traditional church leadership patterns to the consideration of new forms and, to some extent, new functions. A prime example would be Larry Richards and Clyde Hoeldtke's *A Theology of Church Leadership*.³⁸ Here the reader finds represented a wing of evangelicalism that differs substantially in its view of church leadership with the traditional Reformed writers above. The "body life" renewal movement, as it was often characterized, emphasized the cultivation of healthy patterns of relationship within a congregation, and deemphasized—or even reacted against—a focus on biblical terminology and models. Body life leadership is envisioned as focused on facilitating lay member directed ministries, as opposed to overseeing ministries which lay members are encouraged to support. Richards and Hoeldtke eschew even using the terms *elders* and *deacons* in their discussion and in the numerous charts and diagrams they develop.³⁹ Envisioning local churches more as organisms rather than organizations and

³⁸ Lawrence O. Richards and Clyde Hoeldtke, *A Theology of Church Leadership* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1980).

³⁹ For example, the terms *elders* and *deacons* do not appear in their discussion of the qualifications for leadership and the accompanying chart based on relevant Titus, First Timothy, and First Peter passages. *ibid.*, 117-119.

more like a body than a system of programs were salutary messages in their day, when the depersonalization of modernism had negatively impacted American Christianity. Many found a breath of fresh air in the images of body life and illustrations of relationships built on love and concern. But while much that the body life movement had to say regarding interpersonal relationships and ministry is based upon biblical ideas of harmony and service, there did not seem to be a clear and simple picture of what the structure and practice of church leadership would look like in application. In the case of *A Theology of Church Leadership*, for example, the pastor reader will find it difficult to make use of this book's applications of those ideas in a specific congregational setting without adopting wholesale the particular language and practices that Richards and Hoeldtke suggest, thereby making their book an operational manual, so to speak, for the congregation.⁴⁰

Building on, or at least in basic agreement with the body life approach to leadership, is the view of the house church movement. The theological basis for this movement has been articulated most notably by Robert Banks in his *Paul's Idea of Community: the Early House Churches in Their Cultural Setting*,⁴¹ and popularized by him and his wife Julia in their book *The Church Comes Home*.⁴² Banks rightly

⁴⁰ The writer found it interesting to note a connection between the body life movement and the renewed interest in elders leadership to be discussed below. Paul Winslow and Dorman Followwill, two ministers of Peninsula Bible Church, which was the setting for Ray Stedman's *Body Life*, co-authored in 2001 a book advocating church governance built around elders and deacons. (See the bibliography.)

⁴¹ Robert J. Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community: the Early House Churches in Their Cultural Setting*, Revised Edition, Revised ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1994).

⁴² Robert J. Banks and Julia Banks, *The Church Comes Home* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998).

emphasizes the central place of community in Christian relationships within the early Church, and so sees church leadership as community-focused. Emphasizing the centrality of the Christian community as he envisions it in house meetings, Banks sees little need for structure. Any fixed leadership structure is absent, and even what constitutes membership is unclear, so that what is left is a democracy of whoever is gathered at the time. Even outside the house church movement, the ideas of the local church as a democracy and leadership as merely a spontaneous exercise of spiritual gifts by individuals in service to the community have gained wide acceptance. If Banks' strength is his critique of ways in which evangelical ideas of church leadership have been unduly influenced and shaped by the broader American culture that emphasizes power and control, his weakness is his failure to ground this thinking in biblical teaching.⁴³ Banks slips into a kind of higher critical treatment of Scripture that does not fully respect the models that are there in the text. It would be unfair to extend this criticism to the house church movement in general, but his thinking reflects the danger inherent in taking a path that eschews Christian creeds and confessions and jettisons traditional church practices. But if Banks throws the baby out with the bathwater, at least his writing may serve to call attention to the dirty bathwater in terms of harmful leadership patterns.⁴⁴ There is much to be said for guarding against the abuse of authority that comes from uncritically grafting into the church unbiblical models, and writers in the body life/house church movements

⁴³ See the reader annotations in Appendix A for a critique of Banks' ideas in this light.

⁴⁴ See in particular the critiques offered in the work he co-authored with Bernice Ledbetter: Robert Banks and Bernice M. Ledbetter, *Reviewing Leadership: a Christian Evaluation of Current Approaches* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004)

at least verbalize a commitment to such care. The lack of a clear biblical hermeneutic for their leadership model, however, leaves the house church movement vulnerable to just that kind of abuse.⁴⁵ At the least, it seems fair to say that the body life and house church movements have not produced a distinctively Christian leadership model easily understood and widely agreed upon among evangelicals.

A third group of writers may be discerned during the decades that saw the development of the four trends discussed earlier in this section, and all of those trends have some degree of relevance to this group, those whose writings reflect a renewal of interest among evangelicals in congregational leadership through a plurality of elders. In most cases, newer advocates of an elders leadership model have not come to that position through denominational influences. (Setting aside for argument's sake those from a Reformed or Presbyterian heritage, to whom such a concept would not have been new, and whose views would have been reflected in the first group of writers discussed.) These newer advocates of plural eldership have evidenced the willingness described above to associate and work with those of other denominations. Further, many have come to the position they hold on church leadership by parting ways with the doctrinal traditions in which they grew up, and if they have not been influenced in that decision by parachurch organizations and associations, they may at least be said to have drawn support from such entities, and lent them support in return. Finally, those pastors and teachers who have

⁴⁵ The writer's contacts in an area where house churches are numerous provides enough sobering examples of abuses by house church leaders to wonder whether the movement has a better or worse record in preventing abuse than more traditional churches, but that question is outside the purview of this paper.

come to the forefront as advocates of an elders leadership model are more often than not Reformed in their theology. This is not to say that every one of the authors to be discussed below may be said to have been personally involved in each one of these four trends, but it is to say that elements of them are frequently found in their backgrounds and writings.

Coming first chronologically among works the writer would recommend in this area would be Alexander Strauch's *Biblical Eldership: an Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership*, published in a revised and expanded edition in 1995.⁴⁶ Strauch states "this book is aimed primarily at churches that practice eldership but misunderstand its true biblical character and mandate. Its purpose is to define, as accurately as possible from Scripture, what biblical eldership is."⁴⁷ This volume provides one of the most thorough and readable treatments of plural eldership as the most biblically sound and historically rooted form of church leadership, which accounts for its frequent mention among advocates of this view. Strauch divides his book into four parts: a description of eldership, an argument for eldership as he has described it, an exposition of specific relevant Scripture passages, and a discussion of the related topics of the appointment of elders and the relationship between elders and the rest of the congregation. The descriptive section makes extensive use of the shepherd motif in Scripture in identifying

⁴⁶ Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: an Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership*, Rev. and expanded. ed. (Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth Publishers, 1995).

⁴⁷ Strauch, p 10.

the personal characteristics needed in an elder.⁴⁸ He follows a conservative hermeneutic in providing an exegesis of pertinent New Testament passage that supports his thesis, and augments that with discussions from early church history as well.

While not focusing primarily on the means employed by elders in their service to the church, Strauch does have much to say about the practices as well as the principle of plural eldership as the most biblical structure for church leadership, so his presentation includes practical considerations as well as theoretical aspects. Scholarly oriented in some respects, as for example in his lexical discussions, Strauch's book should be accessible to general readers as well as those with a background in biblical studies at the college or seminary level, and with that in mind, the publisher has made available a discussion guide.⁴⁹ *Biblical Eldership* should be on the short list for any person engaging in a serious study of the principles and practice of church leadership, though the writer thinks that Strauch compromises congregational authority in his zeal for eldership. He advocates for an eldership of no fixed number where the elders serve indefinitely and themselves choose new elders to join their group. The congregation votes only on those matters that the elders bring to them. While Strauch counsels elders to seek input from

⁴⁸ While not addressing the topic from the standpoint of a specific structure, Timothy Laniak's work on the shepherd motif as applied to the ministry of church leaders is without equal. Timothy S. Laniak, *Shepherds After My Own Heart: Pastoral Traditions and Leadership in the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006). Timothy S. Laniak, *While Shepherds Watch Their Flocks: Reflections On Biblical Leadership* (Charlotte, NC: Higher Life Development Services, 2009).

⁴⁹ Strauch co-authored a discussion guide booklet to accompany *Biblical Eldership*, with the aim of facilitating use of the book for church study groups. Alexander Strauch and Paul Santhouse, *Biblical Eldership Discussion Guide* (Open For Discussion Series) (Littleton, CO: Lewis & Roth Publishers, 2005). Strauch has also made available an abridgment of *Biblical Eldership* in a 48 page booklet format. Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: Restoring the Eldership to Its Rightful Place in the Church*, rev. ed. (Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth Publishers, 1997).

the congregation, and encourages the congregation members to communicate with the elders, authority for church governance essentially rests in the hands of a self-perpetuating board. Many advocates of elder leadership, the writer included, would desire a more truly congregational structure than that which Strauch advocates.

Already serving pastors who have come to affirm the doctrine of leadership by a plurality of elders have to face the question of how to lead their churches to a similar affirmation and a successful implementation of this practice, and there are some resources available that will be of particular relevance in this circumstance. One such resource is Phil Newton's book *Elders in Congregational Life*.⁵⁰ The first two parts of Newton's book present an argument for church governance by a plurality of elders aimed primarily at a baptist audience, as evidenced by the title of his first chapter "Why *Baptist Elders* Is Not an Oxymoron," but the third part, "From Theory to Practice," will be relevant to pastors of varied traditions desiring to lead their churches to eldership. Newton devotes a chapter to "Thinking about Transition to Elder Leadership," and his counsel to patience in this process is commendable. He urges pastors to spend years building trust with their congregations before embarking upon such a major change, and outlines a process involving building an awareness of the church's current leadership structure, engaging in a long period of study and discussion with the current leadership, spending plenty of time teaching and talking about the topic with the congregation, and only then presenting formal proposals for voting. Newton's comments in this connection are worth noting:

⁵⁰ Phil A. Newton, *Elders in Congregational Life: Rediscovering the Biblical Model for Church Leadership* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2005).

Brief pastorates fail to build the trust necessary to shift from one form of church government to one grounded on God's Word. A pastor's being faithful in the teaching of Scripture concerning the nature of the church, the believer's relationship to the church, the authority and responsibilities of leaders, the unity of the body, and other doctrines related to a New Testament church—all this takes time to be realized in the collective mind of the congregation. Foundational to teaching on ecclesiology are the doctrines related to the inspiration of Scripture, the doctrine of God, the person and work of Christ, soteriology, and the person and work of the Holy Spirit. Faithful exposition of God's Word will give the pastor the opportunity to deal with each of these doctrines as he works his way year-by-year through books of the Bible. *Only when a church begins to think biblically will elder-led leadership seem plausible.*⁵¹

Once a foundation of trust has been laid, Newton recommends a three-step process of evaluation, presentation, and implementation that spans eighteen months to three years or more.⁵² For thoroughness and clarity, the writer found Newton's treatment of transitioning to eldership to be among the best available, so his work is worth consulting, even if one skims over his arguments in the first two parts of the book.

Baptists predominate among recently published resources on eldership, but an exception the writer would recommend for consideration is Benjamin Merkle, whose approach seems among the best in terms of readability for general congregational audiences. His *40 Questions About Elders and Deacons* is easily perused, presenting interpretations of biblical passages in short sections that are well marked for reference use.⁵³ Discussion questions are included that facilitate use of the book for group

⁵¹ Newton, 125-126. (Italics in original.)

⁵² Newton, 126.

⁵³ Benjamin Merkle, *40 Questions About Elders and Deacons* (*40 Questions and Answers Series*) (Grand Rapids, MI.: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2007)

meetings. Despite the limitation implied by the title, Merkle actually begins with a general introduction to biblical teaching on church government and church offices, in which he argues for a congregational form of church governance. In a later book, Merkle focuses more exclusively on the topic of eldership, presenting much of the material found in *40 Questions* in a condensed form without the question and answer format, the group discussion questions, and footnotes.⁵⁴ The easily read format would commend either of these books to the typical adult reader.

Even more condensed, and now printed in a small paperback edition that would commend itself for congregational instruction is Thabiti Anyabwile's *Finding Faithful Elders and Deacons*.⁵⁵ The personal style of Anyabwile's approach conveys a tone that is more pastoral and less academic than most of the above mentioned works. His presentation effectively uses many illustrations, examples, and varied quotations to clarify the principles he explains, and he also provides reading recommendations that are helpful to persons who wish to do more reading on the topic. For introductory use with a church congregation, the writer would recommend Anyabwile's book as one of the best resources available at this time.

Electronic media resources addressing the topic of eldership are readily available. Alexander Strauch, whose written works are discussed above, is featured with other pastors and teachers on a website which specifically addresses the topic of church

⁵⁴ Benjamin L. Merkle, *Why Elders?: a Biblical and Practical Guide For Church Members* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2009).

⁵⁵ Thabiti Anyabwile, *Finding Faithful Elders and Deacons* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012).

eldership.⁵⁶ This extensively developed site includes both written and video presentations devoted to the areas of explaining and defending elders leadership, implementing eldership in a local church, and preparing and training elders. Practical issues and personal application figure prominently in the postings, and this website could easily become a helpful starting point for prayer and discussions among elders. For example, the preface to the first presentation illustrates the importance of mutual affirmation and team building among elders serving together.

John Piper's series of seminar messages on eldership is included among numerous postings addressing eldership topics on the desiringGod website.⁵⁷ Piper's messages are thorough and clearly presented, with an emphasis on application to life. Those interested in transitioning to elders leadership with their own churches may find of particular interest postings on this site related to the transition of Bethlehem Baptist Church to eldership, a transition which encompassed a period of twelve years leading to a congregational vote in 1991 to institute a Council of Elders.

An example of audio material available through the 9Marks ministry is Mark Dever's interview with Thabiti Anyabwile, then the senior pastor of First Baptist Church, Grand Cayman, and Matt Schmucker, chairman of the Board of Elders of Capital City

⁵⁶ John Piper, "Biblical Eldership, Part 1a," desiringGod, May 1, 1999, accessed July 15, 2013, <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/seminars/biblical-eldership-part-1a>. (The seminar is completed in Parts 1b, 2a, and 2b.)

⁵⁷ Postings may be found by using the search engine on the Desiring God website, desiringgod.org.

Baptist Church, Washington, DC, on the training and mentoring of elders.⁵⁸ Also available on the same website is an interview that includes Hunter Powell, who brings to the discussion helpful summaries of the arguments of the congregationalists of the Westminster Assembly that related to church polity, contrasting them with the presbyterian polity position.⁵⁹ Electronic resources like these may appeal to elders/pastors who spend time commuting or exercising through individual activities such as jogging.

A vibrant eldership that effectively shepherds a congregation will be an ideal context for the identification and equipping of those who ultimately will serve as elders in paid positions, either part or full time, and one last resource to be mentioned here has that eventuality in view. Brian Croft's *Test, Train, Affirm, and Send Into Ministry*, a United Kingdom publication, caught the writer's attention with its hefty recommendations, and it is worthy resource.⁶⁰ Croft's work is short, but covers a range of considerations, from theological questions related to the nature of a call to pastoral ministry to practical suggestions regarding the structuring of a congregation's relationship with a pastoral intern. Even if a church is not envisioning such an undertaking in the near future, it would be helpful for the leadership to be exposed to the ideas of Croft's book as an encouragement to think ahead towards this end. Both of the churches discussed in the

⁵⁸ Mark Dever (moderator), "Finding Faithful Elders and Deacons," 9Marks: Building Healthy Churches, February 29, 2012, accessed July 15, 2013, <http://www.9marks.org/media/power-and-importance-polity>.

⁵⁹ Jonathan Leeman (moderator), "The Power and Importance of Polity," 9Marks: Building Healthy Churches, May 31, 2012, accessed July 15, 2013, <http://www.9marks.org/media/polity-everybody>.

⁶⁰ Brian Croft. *Test, Train, Affirm, and Send Into Ministry*. (Leominster, United Kingdom: Day One Publications, 2010.)

project review chapter saw such a development in their own congregation, in which an elder/pastor served as a volunteer elder before being called to a full time paid elder position.

In chapter two, the writer sought to set out a biblically based theology that affirms the doctrine of local church leadership through a plurality of elders. In this chapter, he has suggested that literature in the field substantiates the view that evangelical churches have seen a decline in denominational identity, a movement towards greater involvement of laity, and a renewed interest in Reformed theology that may occasion an openness on the part of evangelical pastors and churches to the consideration of plural eldership as a leadership model.⁶¹ A logical next step from the viewpoint of an interested reader would be to think about the possible benefits for a local church that in fact enjoys leadership by a plurality of elders. To that end, the writer explores in the next chapter whether it is possible to perceive some such benefits through the use of a survey instrument.

⁶¹ Further comments and analysis of pertinent literature will be found in Appendix A: Annotated Reading List of Relevant Sources.

CHAPTER FOUR:

PROJECT DESIGN AND OUTCOMES

The primary project developed for this study involved a survey of pastors of churches followed up with individual conversations and group interviews. The survey sought to gather data that would discover current church leadership practices among congregationally governed churches, as well as provide possible markers to evaluate those practices. Personal interviews conducted by the writer grew out of the survey responses.

The survey instrument used in the study was sent to 264 pastors affiliated with churches belonging to the Conservative Congregational Christian Conference.¹ The churches served by these pastors were all congregationally governed and, by virtue of their affiliation with the CCCC, may fairly be characterized as being within the evangelical community. The size of the churches varied widely, though most fell under the 200 member mark. Geographically, the churches tended to be clustered in New England and the upper Midwest, with a scattering on the West Coast and in other regions. Of the 264 sent (using a CCCC directory), 12 were returned as undeliverable and 2 were refused. Of the remaining 250, 116 surveys were returned, although 4 were so incomplete as to be unusable, leaving 112 for tabulation.²

The writer was gratified by the return rate—44.8% of the 250 that reached a recipient. The large majority of the surveys returned were completely filled out; of the

¹ Appendix B provides a copy of the template used for the survey and accompanying letter.

² Appendix C provides a complete tabulation of individual survey responses.

specific survey item omissions that occurred, most were found in responses to questions 11-15.³ Personal comments were added to many of the survey forms, and in a number of cases, follow up conversations took place with respondents. More formal follow up in the form of extended interviews was pursued in a few cases in particular that will be discussed later.

Among the 112 usable returns, 67 were from pastors who described their churches as rural, 35 were from pastors of suburban churches, and 10 were urban pastors. Three churches were founded in the 17th Century, 11 in the 18th Century, 68 in the 19th Century, 24 in the 20th Century, and 4 were listed as having been founded since 1999, with dates not provided for two churches. Membership numbers varied greatly, from as low as 5 to as high as 1,261. In terms of attendance, which is probably a more helpful statistic, 78 pastors reported having 100 or less in average attendance, 14 were reported 101-200, 8 from 201-550, and one reported 1,400 in attendance. Almost half of the pastors said they had served their churches ten years or more, and 19 of those reported 20 years or more. Overall, the survey responses seem to reflect fairly a sampling of the Conservative Congregational Christian Conference.

After questions establishing the demographic background of the church, the survey instrument asked the respondents to identify their church's form of government (item 8): "The church's elected governing body is a(n) a. board of elders, b. diaconate, c. committee, d. other (please describe) _____."

³ See discussion below for more further comments on the occurrence of omissions.

Responses yielded the following results regarding types of church government: elders, 41; diaconate, 23; committee, 10; and other, 36. Most of the last category were described by respondents as being governed by consistories or councils. It might be that there would have been something to be gained by combining the last two categories—“committee” and “other”—in light of the small number reported as committee governed churches, but the writer decided to retain all four groupings, since that properly reflects the survey instrument. As will be apparent in the tabulation, results for the two categories “committee” and “other” tended to track close to one another.

Of interest to the writer was a comparison of church government types with the degree of shared pastoral responsibilities, both in terms of variety of pastoral duties shared and the amount of time lay leadership spend at those duties. An involvement of the elected church leadership in pastoral care with the pastor would reflect a caring and active leadership. Obtaining data on shared pastoral responsibilities by leadership type would enable the writer to look for any significant differences among those leadership types. Toward that end, the survey instrument asked two questions, items 9 and 10 on the survey instrument. The first of these questions asked the pastor respondents *which* pastoral duties were shared by their leadership group: “9. This group [the one identified by the respondent as the church’s governing body] has pastoral duties including (*choose all that apply*): a. counseling, b. teaching, c. preaching, d. visitation, e. mentoring, f. corrective discipline, g. none of the preceding.” The next question asked the pastor respondents *how many hours, on average*, a member of their leadership group is occupied

with those pastoral duties: “10. On average, how many hours per week does a member of this group spend in these duties? ____.” Results from these two questions were organized by type of church government for the following tables.

Table A, “Shared Pastoral Duties by Church Category,” displays data from question nine, which allowed respondents to designate up to six basic pastoral

Table A: Shared Pastoral Duties by Church Category (Range = 6)

Elected Officers	Total Respondents	Mean	Median	Mode
Elders	41	3.9	5	5
Deacons	22	2.3	2.5	3
Committee	9	1.3	0	0
Other	35	1.8	0.5	0

duties that lay leaders might share. Since all respondents were choosing from zero to six items (question nine quoted above), the range was the same (6) for all categories of churches sorted by differing governing bodies.⁴ (Total respondent figures do not include respondents that did not respond to question nine, to avoid skewing mean figures. This practice is followed for subsequent tables as well.) As this table shows, pastors indicated that elders shared an average of 3.9 out of 6 possible types of pastoral duties, significantly higher than the average shared by deacons, and an average over twice that

⁴ Definitions used in the statistical discussion are as follows: *mean*, or average, is the sum total of observations divided by the number of observations; *median* is the middle term when data are arranged in decreasing or increasing order; *mode* is the observation that appears the maximum number of times; and *range* is the difference between the highest value and lowest value of data when arranged in decreasing or increasing order. For the purposes of this study and given the number of respondents, the mode is not likely to be of great value, but it is included in the tables, since it is a standard statistical element.

for leaders serving on committees and other types of leadership boards such as executive councils. The median and mode figures show even more disparity among the categories. In summary, it can be said that of the responding pastors, those whose churches used an eldership as their leadership structure were more likely to report that those leaders were involved in various types of pastoral ministry within their churches than were pastors of churches with different leadership structures.

Table B, “Service Hours per Week per Leader by Church Category,” displays data from question ten, which asked respondents to provide an average of the amount of

Elected Officers	Total Respondents	Mean	Median	Mode	Range
Elders	38	3.3	5	1	10
Deacons	22	2.3	2	2	8
Committee	8	0.9	0	0	5
Other	31	1.1	0	0	10

time members of leadership groups—elders, deacons, committee members, or members of other types of groups—spend in pastoral duties. The range for the responses categorized by leadership type is determined by the highest individual response recorded by a pastor responding in that category, hence the variation in range. As would have been expected, this table harmonizes with the previous one, with more hours being reported for groups that had been reported as having more pastoral duties. Pastor respondents have estimated the mean, or average, for hours spent on pastoral duties by elders as significantly higher

than the averages for deacons, and once again there is a significant drop to the means for the categories “Committee” and “Other.”

Taken together, Tables A and B may be interpreted to show a noticeable difference in responses by survey respondents based on differences in the leadership structures of the churches being described. Pastors of churches with elders as the elected leadership body are more likely to perceive those lay leaders as giving of their time in pastoral service to a significant extent, as opposed to pastors of churches with a diaconate, committee, or other type of group as the elected leadership group. Might it be fair, then, to suggest that an eldership structure encourages greater participation by lay leaders in the pastoral duties of a church? The data at least make that a possibility.

The writer also desired to ask respondents to evaluate their congregation with respect to characteristics of a healthy church, so that comparisons could be made among churches of differing leadership types. This presented the challenge of clarity and brevity. The writer desired to list attributes that would be clearly understood and applied by the pastor respondents, but those attributes needed to be stated succinctly for a one page survey instrument. In addition, and even more important in the writer’s mind, was the desire to have the attributes or characteristics chosen be biblically oriented rather than culturally focused. Toward this end, the writer searched for biblical passages that might be of relevance. The letters to churches in Revelation clearly contain listings of positive and negative attributes, but these did not lend themselves to use in a survey instrument. It might be possible to glean useful attributes from various epistles, but wording them for

clarity and brevity might be a challenge. Early in the book of Acts, however, the historical narrative offers what is perhaps the most concise summary of what might be call the “ordinary life” of the Church in a given locale. Luke the historian gives us, as it were, a “snapshot” of the church in Jerusalem, not only as it relates to the local populace, but also, and more importantly for purpose of this study, how the members of the church are interacting with one another. The pertinent passage is Acts 2:42-45:

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.

In this summary of the life of the Jerusalem church, five descriptive phrases or clauses form a picture of the believers as a whole. First, they are said to be devoted (*προσκαρτεροῦντες*) to the teaching of the apostles, and the intensity of the verb conveys the importance that the believers attached to this learning. We can be sure that the apostles' teaching was centered on the gospel and rooted in the Scriptures, both because that was the focus of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances to them and because that is the focus of their teaching preserved in the New Testament. The Jerusalem church, then, was characterized by members who made a commitment of time and effort to the study of God's Word. Along with a devotion to learning, the Jerusalem believers displayed a devotion to *κοινωνίᾳ* (fellowship), and verse 44 adds to this the simple expression “they were together” (*ἡσαν ἐπὶ τῷ αὐτῷ*). While it is not easy to briefly describe the interpersonal relations implied by these descriptions, it seems fair to say that the believers

valued relationships with one another and close friendships developed among them.

There is debate whether the phrase τῇ κλάσει τοῦ ἄρτου (the breaking of the bread) refers to shared meals or the observance of the Lord's Supper. The writer's study has led him to follow the latter interpretation, so that we see in the description of the church not only an emphasis upon the Word, but also on sacrament. A fourth object of the believers' devotion is said to be "the prayers" (ταῖς προσευχαῖς). Reference may be made here to the customary Jewish times of prayer, but whether or not that is the case, it is clear that personal prayer was important to the Jerusalem believers. After describing the response of others and the confirmatory acts of the apostles, the generosity of the church is described both in terms of attitude and action. In summary, while we may certainly assume that these believers were sinners saved by grace but not perfected, nevertheless, the descriptions given of them in Scripture compose a picture of exemplary spiritual health that churches today would do well to emulate: consistent study of God's Word, close friendships with one another, regular observance of the Sacraments, diligence in prayer, and generosity in giving. These attributes were made the basis for survey instrument questions that might provide indicators of a congregation's spiritual health.

Based on the above reasoning, five descriptive phrases were composed for the survey that sought to point to expected attributes of a healthy church: participation weekly in some form of learning activity (such as a group Bible study), close friendships with other church members, regular participation in the Lord's Supper, the practice of personal and family prayer, and generous giving of material resources to meet the needs

of others. These phrases formed the basis for survey items eleven through fifteen, which were briefly worded in order to keep the survey to a single page. (See Appendix B.)

Pastor respondents were asked to estimate what percentage of their church's membership might be said to reflect the described values in their own lives.

The strengths and weaknesses of the approach taken with these survey items bear mentioning at this point. It was hoped that using a biblical basis for evaluation would appeal to the pastor respondents as a fitting standard that they would be interested to apply to their congregations. More specifically, it was hoped that the survey's use of the Acts passage, one familiar to almost any pastor, would meet with the respondents' approval as a valid picture of church health. In addition, this would avoid contemporary catch phrases or images that might provoke a reaction, either positive or negative, that might bias the responses. This approach also obviously had the advantages and disadvantages of requiring a subjective assessment by the pastor respondents, since short of conducting a survey of their own with their church membership, the pastors would have to rely upon their personal knowledge of their congregations.⁵

A disadvantage to such a subjective approach would be that pastor who had served a congregation for several years could have an advantage over one who had served a few years. An alternative would have been to ask pastors to perform surveys of their congregations so that individual members would assess their own behaviors. Such an

⁵ One exception to this came to light in the case of a large church that regularly conducts an extensive survey of their own of their church membership; the pastor of this church was able to supply responses to the writer's survey instrument by citing figures from his own church's membership survey results.

alternative would have unacceptably increased the effort and time asked of pastors, however, and undertaking such direct surveying himself was not an option for the writer. In the end, it was hoped that the advantages of the specific survey items developed would outweigh their disadvantages. This question will be addressed again after the survey results are presented.

As noted previously, omissions appeared on returned surveys more often in question 11-15 than elsewhere. Seventeen forms recorded no data for these questions: 4 out of 41 forms in the elder church government category, 1 out of 23 forms in the diaconate church government category, 3 out of 10 forms in the committee church government category, and 9 out of 36 forms in the other category for church government type. These omissions generally came on the forms of pastor respondents who had been serving their churches for relatively shorter periods of time, which probably reflects a lesser degree of confidence in reporting their church membership's practices. Total respondent figures were adjusted accordingly for the computation of means, medians, modes, and ranges for questions in each category. Those results will now be considered.

Table C, "Percentage of Membership in Learning Activity by Church Category" tabulates respondents' answers to item eleven of the survey instrument, which asked respondents to estimate the percentage of their church membership that were "participating weekly in some form of learning activity (such as a group Bible study)." The range between the highest mean (53.6) and the lowest (24.8) is the greatest observed for any of the five survey questions asking for an estimate of membership practices. The

Table C: Percentage of Membership in Learning Activity by Church Category

Elected Officers	Total Respondents	Mean	Median	Mode	Range
Elders	36	53.6	50	50	70
Deacons	21	33.8	30	20	75
Committee	7	24.8	29	10,35	25
Other	26	30.3	30	50	63

average percentage for elder led churches was almost 20 points above the second highest average, which was for deacon led churches. A similar pattern was seen in the median figures, though there was inconsistent variation in the corresponding range figures.

Table D, “Percentage of Membership in Close Friendship by Church Category,” presents respondents’ answers for item twelve, which asked what percentage of

Table D: Percentage of Membership in Close Friendship by Church Category

Elected Officers	Total Respondents	Mean	Median	Mode	Range
Elders	37	75.2	80	80	85
Deacons	21	76.4	80	80	75
Committee	6	60.8	65	none	50
Other	32	71.9	75	75	60

their church membership “have close friendships with other church members.” In this case, the highest mean was found in the responses from pastors of churches led by deacons. Responses from pastors of churches led by elders was lower by a little over 1 point, and the median figures for each of these categories was the same, a rather high

figure of 80. The mean for responses related to churches in the “other” category of church government is 3.3-4.5 below that of the elder led and deacon led churches, and the mean for churches in the “committee” category is another 10+ points lower. As with the other tabulations, the range does not seem to offer helpful data here.

Table E tabulates the results for question thirteen, which asked respondents to estimate the percentage of their church membership who regularly took part in the Lord’s

Table E: Percentage of Membership in Regular Communion by Church Category

Elected Officers	Total Respondents	Mean	Median	Mode	Range
Elders	36	85.1	90	90	50
Deacons	21	82.4	87.5	90	50
Committee	7	80.7	90	95	65
Other	27	80.9	85	100	65

Supper. Out of the five items numbered 11-15, this one garnered the highest percentages overall in all four categories of churches. Responses from pastors of elder led churches yielded a higher mean than those of pastors of churches with other types of government, but only 4.2 points separate the highest and lowest means among the categories. Median figures were also close among the categories.

Table F, “Percentage of Membership in Regular Prayer by Church Category,” presents responses to item fourteen, which asked what percentage of the respondents’ church membership were “practicing personal and family prayer.” In contrast to the previous item, the highest mean (55.9) and the lowest (35.5) have a sizable separation. As with items 11 and 13, the highest mean was found in the responses of pastors of elder led

Table F: Percentage of Membership in Regular Prayer by Church Category

Elected Officers	Total Respondents	Mean	Median	Mode	Range
Elders	33	55.9	57	50	79
Deacons	17	42.0	40	40,50,75	90
Committee	7	47.9	50	30	70
Other	24	35.5	50	50,60	73

churches. There was a similar, though not quite so great, variation among the median figures for the categories.

Survey item number 15 asked pastor respondents to assess the percentage of their memberships that could be said to be “generously giving material resources to meet the

Table G: Percentage of Membership Generously Giving by Church Category

Elected Officers	Total Respondents	Mean	Median	Mode	Range
Elders	37	57.3	60	50	90
Deacons	21	64.3	70	50,70,80	75
Committee	6	49.2	45	25	55
Other	25	45.8	40	30,70	100

needs of others” (Table G). In this category, the mean for responses from pastors reporting on deacon led churches was higher than means for churches in other categories. There was a separation of 7 points between the means in the deacons and elders categories, and much larger separations between the deacons category mean and those for the lowest ranking two categories, committee and other.

Having considered separately responses for all survey items numbered 11-15, it may be helpful to bring together the mean figures from all five items on one table. This may be seen in Table H, “Mean (Average) Comparisons for Answer Categories by Church Category.” As a reminder, question 11 asked about learning activities, such as Bible studies, question 12 pertained to friendships within the church, question 13 asked about participation in Communion, question 14 asked about prayer, and question 15 related to generous giving. In Table H, the highest means for questions 11, 13, and 14 are found in the elders category; the highest means for questions 12 and 15 are in the deacons category. The two categories labeled “committee” and “other” have the lowest means for every question except for question 14, where the mean for the committee category is

Table H: Mean Comparisons for Answer Categories by Church Category

Elected Officers	Question 11	Question 12	Question 13	Question 14	Question 15
Elders	53.6	75.2	85.1	55.9	57.3
Deacons	33.8	76.4	83.2	42.0	64.3
Committee	24.8	60.8	80.7	47.9	49.2
Other	30.3	71.9	80.9	35.5	45.8

higher than that for deacons. This table also prompts the observation that the questions regarding friendships (12) and participation in Communion (13) produced the least variation in the means of the four categories. There is a difference of 5.6 between the highest and lowest means for question 12, and a difference of 4.4 between the highest and lowest for question 13.

Significantly greater differences exist between the highest and lowest means for question 15 (18.5 difference), question 14 (20.4 difference), and question 11 (28.8 difference). Considering just the two highest means for each question, a similar pattern is seen, with the differences between two highest means for questions 12 and 13 being 1.2 and 1.9, respectively, and the differences between the two highest means for questions 11, 14, and 15 being 19.8, 8.0, and 7.0, respectively. What stands out in locating the greatest differences, whether between the highest and lowest means, or the highest and second highest means, is that both are found for question 11. In other words, it is in the area of participation in learning activities, such as Bible studies, that the most variation is seen in the pastor respondents' reporting.

In beginning to think about what one can rightly surmise from this tabulation of data, the writer is reminded of the famous Mark Twain quote "Figures often beguile me, particularly when I have the arranging of them myself; in which case the remark attributed to Disraeli would often apply with justice and force: 'There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics.'"⁶ The measuring and analysis of human behavior is notoriously difficult in the most scientific of surveys, and that is even more the case for a survey like the one administered by the writer. Here, the data to be analyzed was furnished by persons (the pastors surveyed) who were themselves analyzing the behavior

⁶ Mark Twain, *Chapters from My Autobiography*, accessed October 3, 2014, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/19987/19987-h/19987-h.htm>. Twain's attribution of this quote to Disraeli has been questioned, as the statement did not appear in print until long after Disraeli's time, and it has not been found in any of his writings. Many think Twain himself originated the quote.

of others (their congregations).⁷ As noted earlier, questions may be raised in regard to the reliability of the pastors' analysis, and the only way to avoid this would have been through direct surveys of all the churches' members, which would have been cost and time prohibitive. While admitting the above qualifications, however, the writer would suggest that the survey data does have significance for this paper's topic. Patterns of responses were noted that it is difficult to ascribe to either mere randomness or inaccuracies of analysis and reporting on the part of the pastors surveyed, and the pool of surveys is large enough to make the patterns discerned worth noting.

Two patterns in the survey data appear to bear noting, the first relative to responses from pastors of churches listed in the categories "committee" and "other." The responses in these categories produced means that were almost always below the means for the other two categories, "deacons" and "elders." The only exception to this was for question 14, pertaining to the churches' practice of personal and family prayer, where the mean for responses related to churches in the "deacons" category (42.0) fell almost 6 points below that for churches in the "committee" category (47.9), though it was still above that for churches in the "other" category (35.5). What might account for this type of pattern? Are pastors of churches that do not use a leadership structure of elders and/or deacons more critical in evaluating their congregations? Are pastors of churches that have elders more lenient in their evaluations? Making assumptions of this sort would be

⁷ One exception to this, footnoted earlier, was the survey returned which utilized data taken directly from church members' responses. In this case, the church concerned regularly surveys its members on topics related to the questions included in the writer's survey, so the pastor could simply enter data from the church survey in the appropriate place.

difficult to rationalize. One is left with the more reasonable option of considering whether a difference exists among the different types of churches.

The second pattern, related to the above, are the generally higher means observed for responses from pastors of churches with elders leadership, the only exception being the means listed for question 15, where the elders category had the second highest mean value. Especially noticeable in this regard is a comparison of the means for responses to question 11. As noted earlier, in Table C the average percentage for elder led churches was almost 20 points above the second highest average, which was for deacon led churches. This is the greatest separation found between the first and second ranked means for any of the survey items 11-15. Since item 11 related to what percentage of the congregation was involved in learning activities such as Bible studies, may this statistic be linked to a greater participation of elders in their churches' teaching ministry? One way to look for evidence of this might be to examine data for survey forms where item 9b had been selected, which indicated that lay leadership shared teaching responsibilities with the pastor.

Considering the above mentioned data patterns, might it be logical to conclude that there must be some significance to the fact that survey responses across a number of parameters showed a relatively consistent pattern of more indications of spiritual health among congregations with elderships, as contrasted with other forms of congregationally elected leadership? Of course, the patterns described do not necessarily reflect a causal relationship between the higher means reported and the fact that the churches had

elderships. There could be another element involved—churches with elders attract more effective pastors, for example—that has bearing on the reported observations. Certainly, the data would indicate that further study is worth consideration.

The statistical research and analysis outlined above encouraged the writer to proceed with personal interviews and conversations with elders by phone as well as face to face, in short conversations and also in extended dialogue. This took the form of follow up with pastor respondents to the survey instrument that led to dialogue with several different pastors one-on-one and in depth interviews with the elders boards (including the pastors) of two churches. These conversations focused on gaining not only an accurate perception of their experiences but also on listening to their subjective reflections on those experiences. Of particular interest were interviews and conversations with pastors and elders who had been involved in transitions from other forms of church government to eldership.

One such dialogue may serve as an example of those that occurred by means of a number of personal contacts with recipients of survey forms. In this case, the result was an extended phone conversation with Pastor H, recently retired from a congregational church, but with experience with churches affiliated with other denominations. Pastor H expressed a personal interest in the survey topic, and verbalized comments the writer heard in several other conversations. He emphasized the importance of a pastor's listening to people, noting that there is often a disconnect between the reality of relationships within the church and what is described in the church's constitution and by-

laws. Experience impresses this upon any pastor, and some will find it so disconcerting that they will either leave the pastorate in frustration or spend their years in ministry in an attitude of disappointment. Insight will help the experienced pastor to realize that leadership is not a status or position gained through the performing of a sequence of outward actions or procedures, but rather a quality of being that is acquired through the development of personal gifts within the context of personal relationships. The latter requires patience and perseverance, not for weeks or months, but for years and decades. Mere election is not enough, Pastor H asserted, for leaders must first be called by God, and he recommended the practice of discipling men to help them recognize that calling. Care must be taken so that pastors and elders keep their life priorities rightly ordered, maintaining one's own relationship with God and placing family first in terms of ministry. Ultimately, he emphasized, the church belongs not to the pastor, nor the elders, but to the Lord. In that connection, Pastor H also spoke of the tyranny of tradition that can impede growth by resisting change and the dangers of the importation into the church of business models and practices that are unbiblical.

With the hindsight of a lifetime of pastoral ministry, Pastor H reflected, the raising up of godly leadership ought to be a central concern to any pastor. His remarks, similar to those heard from many respondents, are reflected in much of the published work on eldership discussed elsewhere in this paper. On the one hand, his reflections describe an impossible task, fraught with challenges, but it was clear that Pastor H considered the labor a worthy endeavor. There are no quick fixes or easy methods, he and others bore

testimony, but a focus on the identification and equipping of godly leadership should indeed be a priority in the ministry of a pastor.⁸ The writer found such conversations not merely helpful for this project, but personally encouraging as well.

Two personally conducted interviews with elders boards focused on the transition to an elder led model by congregational churches that previously had the typical pastor, deacons, and trustees/executive board model.⁹ Both were old New England congregational churches established in the nineteenth century during the time period when many congregational churches of the region embraced universalism. Organized with Reformed statements of faith, both churches had become more broadly evangelical in theology during the twentieth century, and their congregations had also become smaller in number and demographically older. Both churches called as pastors young men with families who had just completed their seminary training, and those pastors reintroduced Reformed doctrine to the church's preaching and teaching. Both churches eventually returned to an affirmation of the Reformed doctrine of their origins, but while that transition took a relatively smooth path for one of the churches, the way included some significantly rocky terrain for the other congregation. These churches also initiated the changes in church polity that established an elder-deacon model, with the pastor designated as one of the elders.

⁸ Richard Hymen, phone interview by author, Greenville, NH, September 2, 2012.

⁹ The background information provided in this and succeeding paragraphs comes from the writer's own knowledge of the churches described over a period of many years.

One of these congregations, which will be referred to as Church A, worshipped in a ornately decorated wooden worship building with a large sanctuary in a long established New England town. A sizable educational wing was added to accommodate a large Sunday school in the church's heyday at mid-twentieth century, but then, as with many congregations, attendance began to decline. Added to this came strife within the membership that involved the senior pastor and youth pastor as well. Both pastors left, taking some members with them to other churches. The remaining members called Pastor B, an affable young seminary graduate who was a native of New England with a beautiful family.

Pastor B had been introduced to Reformed theology during his seminary education and read widely in Reformed writings as he settled into the pastorate. Discovering the Reformed roots of Church A, it seemed right and reasonable to Pastor B to lead the congregation to reaffirm that foundation. Central to this process was re-adopting the church's original statement of faith and changing the form of government to one with elders and deacons. Significant resistance to this change came to the surface, but in congregational votes (about twenty years prior to the interview discussed below), the necessary measures were passed. Even within the new elders board, however, there were those who continued to oppose the pastor's efforts to lead the church to what he considered more distinctly Reformed practices. After several contentious years, Pastor B resigned. At this point, about fourteen years prior to the interview, the remaining church

members called Pastor C, who was then serving on the elders board, and he has continued in that ministry to this writing.

An interview with Pastor C and the three other men serving as elders took place over an extended dinner with the writer in order to learn from their perspectives on eldership, and in particular their experience of the church's transition to and implementation of eldership.¹⁰ Three of the four present were in positions of leadership during Pastor B's time with the church and characterized the last several years of his pastorate as a time of contention that centered on theological as well as practical differences. After the church reconstituted its government, some elected to the elders board were actively opposed to the more Reformed direction in which the church was being led. (The elected deacons were more in agreement with that direction, so there was less contention on that board.) With the division within the leadership, the church membership was naturally unsettled and declining, though there were a few newcomers who were seeking a consciously Reformed church. When Pastor B resigned, he began to lead a house church with a few church members, but it never became a viable entity.

The writer's interview with the elders of Church A focused for the most part on the time period following Pastor B's resignation. Pastor C, who had filled the pulpit on occasion already, introduced no significant changes, continuing to provide preaching and teaching based upon the Doctrines of Grace. He became an active member of a Reformed fellowship of pastors and laymen in the area, and encouraged the involvement of his

¹⁰ This interview occurred on August 25, 2013. The church and elders' names are not provided to maintain the confidentiality of the participants.

fellow elders with this fellowship's meetings and conferences as well. The first several years of Pastor C's ministry continued to see controversy within the church. With more older members leaving and some people with Reformed beliefs joining, the membership continued to decline and the church struggled financially, with a large building to maintain. There was a gradual shift in the makeup of the elders and deacons boards, and other standing committees that pre-dated them were dissolved.

From the writer's perspective, the present elders enjoy a unanimity of purpose and positive outlook. They share a serious respect for the office of elder. One of them, with many years of service in various leadership positions in the church, spoke of "a great sense of honor and responsibility" that belongs to the eldership, and all the interviewees expressed agreement with this assessment. The most recently elected elder, who had previously been a deacon, described a sense of inadequacy when first asked to consider becoming an elder, and had spent several weeks seeking divine guidance in thought and prayer before accepting nomination. One elder had become a member of the church after having relocated to the area as a result of financial hardship, and he considered that trouble to have been a providence of God to bring him to serve as an elder in the church. The writer was struck with the humility and seriousness with which the interviewees spoke of the office of elder, and the sincerity of their tone. When asked to comment on their understanding of eldership, the initial description provided was that of "an under shepherd." Asked to elaborate, the first terms that were used by the elders to describe their service to the congregation were "protect" and "provide." They see their role as

primarily concerned with the teaching and preaching ministries of the church, and seeing that the church's activities reflect sound biblical principles.

The outlook for the church seems positive, with the church's leadership and members more theologically unified around Reformed doctrine. The elders and deacons share a common vision for the church and are in frequent communication. Church membership has stabilized and the congregation is receptive to the leadership of the elders and deacons. The way forward for Church A promises to be a smoother journey.

Another extended personal interview will serve as a comparison and contrast with the one considered above.¹¹ As noted earlier, this church, which will be referred to as Church N, shared a number of similarities with Church A, though some differences between the churches' histories are worth noting. Church N was not so large in its heyday as was Church A, and at that point had limited space for use other than its sanctuary. If it had not enjoyed the numerical success of Church A, it was also true that it had not experienced division and split as Church A had. Church N's decline had been more gradual, but also more severe in terms of numerical loss than that of Church A. When Church N called Pastor O, attendance at Sunday worship averaged less than twenty, and the remaining members had seriously discussed the possibility of the church's dissolution. A majority of the congregation was past retirement age, there were no young adults in attendance, and only one family, with a single child, actively involved. Several years before Church A called Pastor B as previously discussed, Church N called Pastor O,

¹¹ This second interview took place on September 14, 2013. The church and elders' names are not provided to maintain the confidentiality of the participants.

like Pastor B, a young man recently graduated from seminary with a small family. In another similarity, Pastor O's preaching and teaching was informed by his Reformed theology, and he desired to lead Church N to reaffirm its Reformed roots. The church voted to re-adopt its original statement of faith and also to institute an eldership form of church governance.

The writer's extended conversation with the elders of Church N included eleven present or former elders, two of whom currently serve in pastoral roles, and the content of the discussion included both reflection upon the development of the eldership from its establishment and the manner in which it functions at present.¹² The elders had been apprised of the purpose of the writer's meeting with them ahead of time, and early on in the discussion, an elder offered the observation that the development of the church eldership could be described in four phases: an initial stage, in which elders served primarily in an advisory role to Pastor O; a "working phase," when the elders took on many of the pastoral functions after Pastor O's leaving; a period of "establishment" after Elder M had been called as pastor, during which governance and ministry roles were more clearly establishing within the eldership; and the present "consolidation" phase, characterized by a simplification of goals and methods. The others present expressed agreement with this overall view of the eldership's evolution, which saw its development as a gradual transformation with marked times of stress that precipitated significant development and spiritual growth.

¹² The writer also sat in on an elders meeting as an observer on a separate occasion.

In the early years of the eldership, leadership roles on the new elders and deacons boards were filled by the same individuals that had served in leadership before the constitutional changes, which meant that the informal patterns of relationships within the church's leadership remained essentially the same as they had been prior to the organizational reconfiguration. Changes in the make up of the eldership were gradual as older church members became less active. During these early years of Pastor O's ministry, seminary students, most of them married and some with children, became a part of the worshipping congregation, several serving as interns, but most of these families were associated with the church for a relatively short time and did not assume positions of leadership. Of more long range significance were new families from the local area that were slowly added to the church.

As mentioned above, this period was characterized by a functioning of the elders largely in an advisory role to Pastor O, though it must be added that with his guidance, elders did take on visible leadership roles within the congregation. For example, they assisted in the leading of worship, prayed with and for members of the congregation, and were encouraged in the practice of hospitality. Pastor O taught from Scripture biblical principles of eldership, such as the "elders of ten" application from Exodus 18, providing the theological framework for the ministry of elders that he envisioned. The eldership functioned largely under the guidance of Pastor O as "the first among equals," and the church enjoyed gradual growth in terms of resident members. Pastor T was called by the church primarily to lead ministry to youth and families, and he was a member of the

eldership along with Pastor O, but it was still the case for most of the congregation that the two employed pastors were more clearly seen as church leaders than other elders.

The stresses mentioned above that precipitated change for the elders concerned first of all Pastor O's ministry. Pastor O experienced a serious illness that effectively took him out of ministry for an extended period of time, during which other elders filled his preaching and teaching roles, as well as other pastoral responsibilities. While this proved to be a temporary circumstance, it foreshadowed the more significant event years later of the church's voting to affirm Pastor O's accepting a call to pastor another church. With this more permanent change, the eldership took up more in earnest the pastoral responsibilities of Pastor O. Primed by Pastor O's teaching, the church sought for pastoral leadership within its own midst, with the result that Elder M, one of the currently serving elders, was chosen to expand his service as elder by receiving a salary from the church. Pastor M has served in this role since then, and Pastor T has continued in his role of focusing on ministry to youth and families. With these changes, the church's eldership increasingly functioned as a shared leadership team. Subsequent stresses that stimulated further movement towards a genuinely shared leadership came when a family concern took Pastor T from active ministry for a time and Pastor M became seriously ill. At this point, the eldership again expanded their duties to fill the pastor's roles. In each of these cases when a crisis resulted in limitations upon the ministry of a full time pastor, the decision was made by the eldership not to bring in another pastor from outside the congregation, but rather to pick up the pastoral duties themselves. This, in the writer's

opinion, was crucial in the transition of the elders from being advisors to pastors to being pastors themselves.

Having been through this trial by fire, as it were, the writer's impression is that the eldership realized for the first time that they could indeed function as leaders in reality as well as name, and they for the first time seriously considered what should be the shape of their ministry together. The "working elder" phase then evolved into a period during which governance and ministry roles were more clearly established by the eldership. One of the most important lessons learned during this time, one of the elders mentioned, was that "authority is more responsibility than power." The responsibility for caring for and leading the church was embraced by all the elders. Meetings began to include not only the noting of congregational concerns, but also actively seeking to identify the ways in which God has equipped their particular church for ministry prompted by those concerns. As an example, in the meeting observed by the writer, it was mentioned that some church members were dealing with issues related to homosexuality within their family relations, and the ensuing discussion led to the planning of teaching and discussion times addressing these issues. To facilitate not only awareness on the part of the elders, but also to encourage "coaching" members in the use of their gifts, elders were "embedded" in all the ministries of the church, and elders and deacons were often paired in ministry. As part of the original structure of the eldership, an elder sits on the deacon board and both an elder and deacon sit on the missions board, so that the three most active church leadership groups are in close communication. After a particularly

trying time related to public opposition on the part of some townspeople to a church building project, a joint quarterly meeting of all elders, deacons, and mission board members was instituted which has further strengthened communication and cooperation.

The weathering of difficulties together and the construction of a large educational/recreational building seem to have been markers of a maturing of the eldership into the present phase of consolidation and simplification of goals and methods. Pastors M and T continue to serve as full-time elders, but the other elders are considered as fully qualified as the pastors for their service as elders. The present eldership evidences a propensity for lively discussions of issues, though they maintain that the Holy Spirit brings consensus that provides true unity after decisions are made. In this connection, mention was made of the importance of the chairperson of the board, who oversees the board's agenda and sees to it that "back burner" issues are not overlooked. It was noted that a long period of time is taken to identify elder candidates. This process is aided by the fact that the elders are shepherding members, seeking to discern and encourage the use of members' gifts, so they become aware of those with leadership gifts.

The writer was struck by a tone of confidence and camaraderie among the elders, both past and present, who were involved in the interview. They are comfortable with one another and the overall well being of the church seems to give credence to the comment made that there is a synergy between the elders and the congregation. The comment was made that a plurality of strong elders attracts a certain kind of pastor and develops a certain kind of congregation, and that seems to the writer an accurate assessment. Church

Church B has a distinct personality that is reflected each Lord's Day in the elder led worship. From a small group struggling to keep the church alive, it has become a healthy and vibrant body confidently looking forward.

The experiences of Church A and Church B differ from one another, but both would serve as an encouragement to churches that are contemplating a possible transition to the practice of eldership. The summaries above have not thoroughly covered all the difficulties, nor all the pleasures, of the transitions they have made, but for both congregations, progress has been made where before there was stagnation and decline. Obviously, there have been many other factors that have contributed to that progress beyond the factor of establishing elderships, but the leadership of both churches see that factor as a very important element.

The writer set out in this chapter to build upon the theological foundation for his thesis and analysis of trends within literature on the topic with the use of a survey instrument followed by narratives gained through personal interviews with pastors and elders. The survey and narratives were evaluated in order to discern patterns that might support the writer's thesis in favor of encouraging the use of an eldership model of leadership as a help towards church revitalization, especially among established small churches in decline.

The survey instrument was well received, and the almost 45% return rate provided the writer with a healthy sampling of the churches that he had targeted: congregationally governed churches with a variety of leadership structures: elders,

deacons, committees, and others (such as church councils). Grouping the responses of pastors according to church leadership types, churches led by elders tended to be evaluated more favorably by their pastors in terms of healthy church attributes than did churches led by other types of leadership groups. These results suggest that there is a potential for beneficial results for a church that adopts an elder leadership model along biblical lines. Narratives constructed from interviews with elders of two relatively small churches that made just such a change several years prior to the interviews lent further support to the suggestion of possible beneficial results.

The theological foundation presented in chapter two is in harmony with the research results of this chapter. The suggestion of benefit to churches employing an eldership model is supported by the prominence given to elders as leaders in Scripture, and in particular by the New Testament evidence of elders as church leaders. Further support of church leadership by elders is found in historic orthodox theology, especially theology in the tradition of the congregationally governed churches that were the focus of this thesis-project.

The literature review of chapter three also discovered some connections between recent thought and the research discussed in this chapter. Significant support among writers from varied backgrounds would add support to the writer's suggestion that openness on the part of evangelical pastors and churches to the consideration of plural eldership as a leadership model is merited. While a causal relationship has not been proven between a leadership structure that employs a biblical eldership model and a

church's health as reflected in positive attributes such as those reflected in Acts 2, the writer would suggest that the correlation shown between these two factors makes such a relationship an idea to be seriously considered by the reader.

CHAPTER FIVE:

SUMMARY AND EVALUATION

This thesis project has advocated for a model for church leadership that incorporates a plurality of elders who serve as leaders together of the congregation. The writer's initial thesis was that the pursuit of this model will have a beneficial and observable effect on the church as a body. He has sought to establish a biblical basis for this thesis, and to seek evidence that might support it, both in available literature and through personal research. This study's parameters have been limited to a sampling of congregationally governed, evangelical churches, namely, those of the writer's own denomination.

A careful study of Scripture has shown that the concept of eldership involving a plurality of elders who understand leadership as service to God and his people provides the solid foundation for a local church in any setting. In the midst of a culture obsessed with looking and acting young, the Bible repeatedly sets forth those who are elders as those to follow and emulate. In pursuing this biblical model, a local church is witnessing to an alternative world view that will implicitly appeal to persons who recognize, consciously or unconsciously, the impossibility of pursuing the fountain of youth. In an economic system that idealizes independence and individual wealth, biblical models emphasize community and mutual commitment. The testimony of elders who evidence real mutuality and work together to serve rather than lord it over others will point others to an eternal wealth that gives a joy that surpasses the accumulation of mere material

things. In these and many other ways, the biblical model of a plurality of elders will witness to the power of the Gospel that brings salvation to people who realize the deadness of their hearts and the desperation of their souls. A congregation that has at its core an eldership that patterns themselves after the Shepherd of their souls will not only find itself strengthened but will find it has evangelistic opportunities that it did not previously have. Best of all, any church, even a small fellowship, can pursue this biblical model because it does not demand large resources, but only a few willing servants.

A review of literature has revealed that the concept of plural eldership in congregationally governed churches may be well received among such congregations. As is the case with other evangelical churches, they have seen a decline in denominational identity, a movement towards greater involvement of laity, and a renewed interest in Reformed theology—factors that have contributed to that openness. The resurgence of interest in and application of plural eldership in recent decades evidenced further that this practice is not a historical relic, but an effective methodology for contemporary congregations. In fact, recent publications have shown that this time tested practice has many advantages over modern models of church leadership that seemed at first promising but, when applied, proved to have serious weaknesses and vulnerabilities. Evangelicals considering elder leadership as a model for their churches have a plethora of resources available, and a sampling of those resources yields much work of high quality.

The survey research undertaken has yielded results that commend further consideration. The statistical data is limited, so it would be unwise to pronounce a clear

connection between a church's having an eldership and its spiritual health. However, it is reasonable to suggest that, at least in the case of congregationally governed evangelical churches, there are grounds for further investigation.

Were the writer to undertake such a project again, improvements could be made to the process. One possibility would be to engage pastors and elders in the composition of survey items so as to make them more accurate and clear. The "committee" category of leadership might be broadened to include by name groups like church councils that function as committees, so that the rather ambiguous "other" category would be smaller.¹ Another piece of information that could be solicited is how many years the church's leadership structure had been in place, which might identify more congregations whose experience in changing leadership patterns could be researched and analyzed.

The writer wonders what more manipulation of the survey data might yield. Would correlating the responses for question eleven with whether item 9b was circled yield support for the writer's inferences concerning elder leadership? More could also be done to search for other variables to explain the patterns seen in the means that were pointed out in chapter four. Areas to investigate for correlation might include longevity of pastoral service and church size.

The writer would like to see others carry forward research relative to churches that have adopted or re-adopted eldership models in the recent past. The two churches whose narratives were very briefly summarized in chapter four are just the tip of the

¹ Pastors who selected the "other" category were asked to fill in a name for the leadership group in their church, and most of these did reflect the committee model.

iceberg of churches that have made similar transitions in leadership models. That a transition to an eldership from another type of structure will probably not be a quick and easy shift is suggested by these narratives, but they also suggest that the transition may will yield long term benefits for a congregation. Is that truly the case, or are they anomalies? A study could be undertaken to include not only well-known churches that have made the change to leadership by elders, such as Bethlehem Baptist Church during John Piper's pastorate and Capitol Hill Baptist with Mark Dever, but also smaller churches like those the writer considered. If such a study were undertaken, more could be done to ascertain whether a change to an elders leadership structure has played a role in growth seen in these churches, or whether other factors better account for observed growth.

Another direction that could be taken would be to engage congregation(s) in a survey, rather than just the pastor(s). As mentioned in chapter four, one large church included in this project conducts an annual survey of the church membership, and such a survey could serve as a beginning point for a reshaping of this project's survey instrument that would provide a more detailed comparison of churches of different leadership types. An attempt could be made to choose churches of similar size, setting, *etc.*, so as to isolate as much as possible the variable of leadership structure. This would also allow a closer comparison of similarities and differences among leaders who function within varied structures of leadership.

“What kind of a future is there for a little church like this one?” asked Tyler, the hypothetical parishioner at the beginning of this paper, verbalizing the question on the mind of the writer himself as he entered the doctor of ministry program that occasioned this paper. Perhaps the question was really a cover for his own self-questioning as he took on the challenges of pastoral ministry after a long hiatus. “Do I have what it will take of a part-time pastor to discover a future for this church? Can I find the means for encouraging the church to end years of stagnation and experience new life?” Years of study and service later, a concrete answer to these questions is still elusive, but some foundational truths have been affirmed and some hopeful indicators may be discerned.

The writer finds himself answering Tyler’s question, and his own question as well, with “Yes, there is hope for your little church, and working towards the goal of plural eldership with patience and perseverance might be a means to that hope’s manifestation.” Such a process will never be *the* means to realize a church’s—or the Church’s—hope, for that ultimately rests in Christ alone. His is the power and the glory, and if there is to be success through any particular method, it is in the final analysis because he wills it to be so. In that spirit, then, the writer offers his work and conclusions to the reader and commends the reader to the Lord of the Church.

APPENDIX A

ANNOTATED READING LIST OF RELEVANT SOURCES

Books

Anyabwile, Thabiti. *Finding Faithful Elders and Deacons*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012.

This short and accessible treatise serves as an excellent resource for congregational instruction. Anyabwile is unusually gifted at combining succinct biblical truth with a plethora of illustrations and examples that make the essential facts of his presentation clear. His balanced approach is reflected in the wide variety of quotations and reading recommendations in his book.

Banks, Robert J. *Paul's Idea of Community: the Early House Churches in Their Cultural Setting, Revised Edition*. Revised ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1994.

Banks provides in this volume a theological underpinning for the house church movement born in the 1960's in the West. (This is to distinguish it from the movement springing from very different roots that has grown up in persecuted countries, most notably China.) As one who came to adulthood in that era, reading Banks' work felt a bit like stepping back in time, as the mood of his book clearly reflects the anti-authoritarianism of the day and brought to memory some of the gatherings in homes and parks where I was present. The first edition of this book put the author in the forefront of the house church movement, and a few years after publishing the revised version of *Paul's Idea*, he and his wife Julia wrote *The Church Comes Home*, which popularized the themes of Banks' academic work and added to them practical guidance for the development of house churches.

If every creative thinker has one big idea, Banks' is in the title of this book, for the concept of community may be said to form the core of his thinking. The central predicament of human beings is the inability to experience community with God and with other people, so the solution is a freeing for community. "So this freedom granted by God not only transfers men and women out of a broken relationship with God and a defective solidarity with others into a new community with God and others but also inclines them to live the kind of life that will extend and deepen that new community itself." (chapter two.) Banks ultimately sees what should be the central character of churches (Banks refutes the idea of "any alleged universal church") as being corrupted by Catholicism on the one hand, which focuses on "a rite," and Protestantism on the other, which focuses on "a book." Rather, "the focal point of reference for Paul's [sic] communities is neither a book nor a rite, neither a code nor a cult, but a set of relationships. God primarily communicates to them, not through the written word and tradition or mystical experience and cultic activity, but through one another." (chapter ten.)

As helpful as Banks' discussion of Greek and Roman cultural understanding of human relationships may be, two crippling deficiencies mar his work, the first of which

may be inferred from the previous quote. The Word of God is not presented as central, nor is it affirmed as inerrant and sufficient for Christian doctrine. This allows Banks to relegate the pastoral letters to an appendix entitled “The Drift of the Pastorals,” thereby discounting what they have to say about church relationships as not being truly Pauline. (Interestingly, he mitigates his comments on the pastorals in his revision, and even with their “improbable statements” now says that “they are still canonical,” but as Greg Gilbert points out in his review of the book, Banks dismisses any significant contribution from the pastorals to his analysis. One wonders if his curtailing of his rhetoric was done to make his work more palatable to a wider audience.) His truncated interpretation of Scripture enables him to promote a view of church that has no room for any offices or positions of authority, so that we are left with basically a “town meeting democracy,” but without a moderator or boards. Membership itself is unclear in Banks’ presentation, so structure is almost non-existent, with every question of form and function left to group consensus. Homage is paid to the Holy Spirit’s indwelling, but without an authoritative Word, there is ultimately no standard of faith and practice outside the group that identifies itself as a church.

This leads to the other serious weakness of Banks’ ecclesiology is an inadequate understanding of sin, and hence, of salvation. He speaks frequently of “broken relationships,” but not clearly of a state of being dead in sin or of suppressing the truth in unrighteousness. Without an adequate view of personal depravity, one can place too much confidence in a local body that does not see itself as belonging to or needing “the Church” as a universal entity. Banks has eschewed individualism in a personal sense, placing great emphasis on entrance into community as inseparable from the acceptance of the Gospel, but his view results a confining of church connections at the level of egalitarian house churches which have little connection with one another. His model is not a helpful one as a framework for church leadership.

Banks, Robert, and Bernice M. Ledbetter. *Reviewing Leadership: a Christian Evaluation of Current Approaches*. Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Academic, 2004.

At first glance this work does not seem to belong in a bibliography of this kind, since it focuses not on church leadership *per se*, but rather on the concept of leadership considered academically. However, the authors provide well-researched and sound analysis of theories of leadership that may be helpful grist for thought, especially for the task of pastoring church leaders who are also leaders in business and other fields. While not a volume that one will consult often, it is worth using in order to gain a helpful perspective on leadership as it is seen in the larger culture, which inevitably impacts and is impacted by Christian thought and practice. The author’s critique of popular writing that purports to give models of leadership based upon various biblical figures (*Moses on Management, Jesus CEO, etc.*) is in itself worth the cost of the book. The emphasis on leadership founded upon principles of integrity, faithfulness, and service is well supported with many case studies of leaders from all walks of life. Pastors need to

remember that they are shaping a leadership culture within their churches, and this book will help them to recognize and evaluate that culture.

Barna, George. *Building Effective Lay Leadership Teams*. Ventura, Calif.: Issachar Resources, 2001.

What reader's guide on church elders could be complete without the inclusion of the Southern California guru of church research? Barna begins, naturally enough, with reference to polling data to build his argument for the use of team leadership in churches. He consciously avoids a biblical basis for his conception of church leadership: "I sometimes cringe when I read an impassioned plea for Christians or churches to adopt a particular perspective or practice because it is biblical, only to find the scriptural evidence to be forced. Let me be forthright about the role of teams in the Bible: the Word does not make a big deal about the importance of leaders serving in teams." Although Barna states that "Our ministry principles and methods should be derived from the Bible," his use of Scripture is primarily for supportive and illustrative purposes. For example, biblical support for the practice of team leadership is only one among several reasons he gives for this approach, along with others such as "less stress" and "greater synergy." This is in keeping with the absence of any uniqueness of the church as a body in this book, a presupposition that is obvious in the statement "In business and ministry, however, where the fate of the organization is dependent upon the quality of the leadership provided, the role of the team captain is far from being an empty commendation." As reflected in this quote, Barna's basic model for church leadership is the concept of a team with an active captain, a model that he asserts is supported by his statistical research.

Barna's book will be of limited value to churches seeking to discern and implement biblical principles of church leadership. His thesis stands on the unsure foundation of his own research, with seven of the sixteen books in his bibliography being his own works. The helpful points that he does make will be available in teaching that is more effectively biblical in its foundation. On a practical note, the physical copy of this book which I used was poorly put together, with pages easily detached from the binding, and while no proofreading is perfect, it amused me to see capitalization and grammatical errors that reflected machine proofing in a bold-faced chapter subheading "Six Steps Used To Great Affect By Other Churches."

Berghoef, Gerard, and Lester DeKoster. *The Deacons Handbook: a Manual of Stewardship*. Grand Rapids, MI: Christian's Library Press, 1980.

Written as a comprehensive text on the biblical foundations and outworking of diaconal ministry, the writers, laymen in the Christian Reformed Church, take the reader from basic principles of giving into a discussion of the office of deacon. In a textbook style with short chapters, general and Scriptural indexes, and frequent templates for diaconal use, this book is written for a lay audience and is meant as an ongoing reference for deacons.

_____. *The Elders Handbook: a Practical Guide for Church Leaders*. Grand Rapids, MI: Christian's Library Press, 1979.

With the same format as their above listed volume and with a similar intent as regards elders, this book strives as once to be theological and applicable. As does *The Deacons Handbook*, the authors includes topical listings of Scripture texts for reference and outline not only principles of leadership but also specific guidelines for their use, such as guidelines for visiting critically ill people. Both this book and the previous listing contain much sound common sense guidance that could be useful to an elder with limited knowledge and experience in the broad range of an elder's shepherding duties.

Brand, Chad Owen, and R. Stanton Norman, eds. *Perspectives On Church Government: Five Views of Church Polity*. Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2004.

This comparison of church polity models opens with chapters by Brand and Norman on the importance of polity and its historical development. Five church leadership views are then presented: single elder, presbyterian, democratic congregational, episcopal, and plural eldership. The writing styles of the presenters differ widely, but overall this volume provides an interesting comparison of views through arguments and counter-arguments.

Dever, Mark. *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*. New expanded ed. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004.

This work presents what one might say is Mark Dever's passion for the revitalization of evangelical churches through a renewed emphasis on biblical preaching and discipling. The characteristics of a healthy local church that he identifies are to a large extent Dever's responses to what he sees as an acculturation of many evangelical churches to the larger American culture. Of particular relevance to this study is Dever's ninth mark, which is biblical church leadership. He calls for a return to leadership by plurality of elders elected by the congregation.

Duncan, J. Ligon, and Susan Hunt. *Women's Ministry in the Local Church*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006.

This volume is included here primarily for two reasons. First, it includes a discussion of Scriptures relevant to eldership and the question of gender that is biblically based and clear. Secondly, as Duncan and Hunt argue here, it is important that there be an apologetic for women's ministry that sets it within a comprehensive understanding of the church as a body, rather than merely compiling a list of duties for women. Building upon biblical doctrine, the authors provide an abundance of help in practical implementation of the principles they have explained, making this a book of significant practical value.

Gunderson, Denny. *The Leadership Paradox: A Challenge to Servant Leadership in a Power Hungry World*. Rev. ed. Discipleship Essentials. Seattle, WA: YWAM Pub., 2006.

Topically arranged, with fictional narratives to introduce biblical texts and frequent illustrations and quotes, this book is written with a built in study guide for use with personal study and/or group discussion. Gunderson organizes his book using a chronology of Jesus' earthly ministry. His work has a devotional tone that could make it a helpful tool for ongoing personal assessment by elders and deacons seeking to incorporate biblical values into their services as leaders.

Laniak, Timothy S. *While Shepherds Watch Their Flocks: Reflections On Biblical Leadership*. Charlotte, NC: Higher Life Development Services, 2009.

Composed as a series of daily readings and augmented by appealing artwork, Laniak has created a presentation of leadership seen through the paradigm of shepherding that is widely accessible to nonacademic readers. In fact, it is so visually attractive that it would not be surprising to see its readers leaving it out on a coffee table for repeated viewing. One can easily see this book being used personally by elders who are also receiving teaching based on Laniak's monograph, *Shepherds After My Own Heart* (See bibliography).

Merkle, Benjamin. *40 Questions About Elders and Deacons (40 Questions and Answers Series)*. Grand Rapids, MI.: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2007.

Merkle states that he utilized a question and answer format to make this book more user friendly, and the structure does make for ease of reference when seeking his thoughts on a particular aspect of biblical teaching on elders and deacons as church leaders. He has also included discussion questions with the intention of encouraging the book's use for group study. His writing is clear and straightforward, written with a general audience in mind. Merkle specifically focuses upon textual interpretation, dealing only indirectly with historical and practical matters.

Newton, Phil A. *Elders in Congregational Life: Rediscovering the Biblical Model for Church Leadership*. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2005.

Newton writes as a Southern Baptist and SBC pastors are his primary audience as he presents biblical and historical arguments for a plurality of elders as leaders of each local church. The latter part of the book addresses methodology in transitioning to an elder led church structure, and it is this section of Newton's work that would be helpful to a broader audience including non-baptists.

Payne, Tony, and Colin Marshall. *The Trellis and the Vine: The Ministry Mind-Shift That Changes Everything*. Kingsford, Australia: Matthias Media, 2012.

This book from Down Under comes with an enthusiastic recommendation from Pastor Mark Dever of Capitol Hill Baptist Church, who says "This is the best book I've read on the nature of church ministry." Using a parable of a trellis and the vine that grows on it, Marshall (acknowledged by Payne as the origin of most of the book's ideas) differentiates between "vine work," which is "to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ in the power of God's Spirit, and to see people converted, changed and grow to maturity in that gospel," and "trellis work," which is "management, finances, infrastructure, organization, governance." Marshall's basic theme is encouraging a focus upon "vine work" rather than "trellis work," since he sees the latter receiving more attention at the expense of the former in most American churches. Thoughtful, planned discipleship is presented as the biblical model to be emulated, and much attention is paid to the practical implementation of this model in a variety of church settings.

Richards, Lawrence O., and Clyde Hoeldtke. *A Theology of Church Leadership*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1980.

This volume is a theological presentation of leadership arising out of the "body life" church renewal movement that began to take shape in the 1960's. Characteristic of this philosophy, Richards and Hoeldtke eschewed any designation of particular leadership roles, as illustrated by the fact that they omitted the terms *elders* and *deacons* from the leadership chart they constructed from Titus, First Timothy, and First Peter passages. They focused instead on relational matters, emphasizing a people-centered ministry orientation that builds mutual allegiance to God and one another. Richards and Hoeldtke included many charts and diagrams, along with case studies and discussion questions, and yet their work lacked simplicity and clarity, which may reflect its attempt to promote a leadership that is responsible for the "quality of life of the congregation," meaning primarily healthy patterns of interaction among the members. In terms of specific ministries, they envisioned leadership that was largely "hands off," allowing decisions to be made by those responsible for carrying them out. The emphases of the "body life" leadership model naturally lent themselves to the subsequent "house church" movement and the formation of independent charismatic churches that grew out of informal gatherings of people disaffected with established churches.

Strauch, Alexander. *Biblical Eldership: an Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership*. Rev. and expanded. ed. Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth Publishers, 1995.

This book is an extensive presentation of Strauch's view that the only form of church government sanctioned by Scripture incorporates a plurality of male elders who have pastoral responsibilities. He bases his arguments upon his interpretations of Scripture, and includes in his book expositions of key New Testament passages related to

church elders. With his focus on advocating this doctrinal position on church leadership, Strauch does not discuss the elders' ministry itself in this volume.

Strauch, Alexander, and Paul Santhouse. *Biblical Eldership Discussion Guide (Open For Discussion Series)*. Littleton, CO: Lewis & Roth Publishers, 2005.

This publication is a booklet designed to guide group discussions of the topics discussed in Strauch's *Biblical Eldership*. Twenty-one discussion guides, designed to be used individually or in sequence, present a brief reading, discussion questions, and notation of relevant pages from *Biblical Eldership*.

Swartley, Richard H. *Eldership in Action through Biblical Governance of the Church*. Dubuque, IA: ECS Ministries, 2005.

Swartley writes as a "tent-making elder" with the intent of presenting principles and practical models for church leadership by a plurality of elders. Much of his experience has been in the context of larger evangelical churches, so this book has more consideration of the larger church context than many others in the field. (He was one of the founding elders of a church that grew to an attendance of two thousand adults.) Swartley is in agreement with the biblical hermeneutic of Alexander Strauch, and in fact worked with Strauch on publishing projects. An engineer by profession, Swartley's writing reflects an orientation towards questions of application, so his book has a "how to" approach. How does an elder council make decisions, by majority or unanimous consent? Are elders to be elected for a term, or indefinitely? Who chooses them? How can domination of the council by one or a few be avoided? Many concrete issues such as these are addressed by Swartley, and while one may not always agree with his conclusions, he raises important concerns that leaders would do well to anticipate.

Other Sources

Dever, Mark, moderator. "Finding Faithful Elders and Deacons." *9Marks: Building Healthy Churches*. www.9marks.org. 9Marks, February 29, 2012. Accessed July 15, 2013. <http://www.9marks.org/media/power-and-importance-polity>.

Dever interviews Matt Schmucker, chairman of Capital City Baptist Church Board of Elders, and Thabiti Anyabwile, at that time Senior Pastor of First Baptist Church, Grand Cayman, Cayman Islands. As the title indicates, this discussion focuses on the development of church leadership through the training and mentoring of deacons and elders in the local church. The conversation is practically oriented and includes many anecdotal comments that illustrate the principles discussed.

Leeman, Jonathan, moderator. "Polity Is for Everybody." *9Marks: Building Healthy Churches*. [www.9marks.org](http://www.9marks.org/media/polity-everybody). 9Marks, January 31, 2013. Accessed July 15, 2013. <http://www.9marks.org/media/polity-everybody>.

Leeman directs a discussion on the importance of church polity among Mark Dever, Chad Van Dixhoorn, and Hunter Powell. Mark Dever is Senior Pastor of Capital Hill Baptist Church and has authored work on church government; Chad Van Dixhoorn is editor of *The Minutes and Papers of the Westminster Assembly, 1643-1653*; and Hunter Powell is Senior Pastor of Guilford Baptist Church of author of *The Dissenting Brethren and the Power of the Keys, 1640-1644*, a dissertation approved by the University of Cambridge. Reflecting both presbyterian and congregational perspectives, this conversation presents well the arguments for an emphasis on polity as vital to the healthy life of the local church.

Leeman, Jonathan, moderator. "The Power and Importance of Polity." *9Marks: Building Healthy Churches*. [www.9marks.org](http://www.9marks.org/media/polity-everybody). 9Marks, May 31, 2012. Accessed July 15, 2013. <http://www.9marks.org/media/polity-everybody>.

This discussion focuses on congregational authority and elder leadership, with particular attention to church discipline as Leeman interviews Mark Dever and Hunter Powell. Mark Dever is senior pastor of Capital Hill Baptist Church and has authored work on church government; Hunter Powell was at the time of the interview Associate Pastor of Guilford Baptist Church, Sterling, Virginia, and author of *The Dissenting Brethren and the Power of the Keys, 1640-1644*, a dissertation approved by the University of Cambridge. Powell brings to the discussion helpful summaries of the arguments of the congregationalists of the Westminster Assembly that related to church polity, contrasting them with the presbyterian polity position. The discussion has a decidedly practical emphasis, touching on various aspects of church discipline, with many personal illustrations provided by the participants.

Mathis, David, and Kevin De Young. "Christian Eldership." *Theology Refresh: Podcast for Christian Leaders*. [www.desiringgod.org](http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/theology-refresh/christian-eldership). Desiring God Foundation, February 26, 2013. Accessed July 15, 2013. <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/theology-refresh/christian-eldership>.

Mathis interviews Kevin De Young, pastor of University Reformed Church, East Lansing, Michigan on the definition and practice of church eldership. De Young emphasizes the metaphor of shepherding from Scripture.

Piper, John. "Biblical Eldership, Part 1a." (completed in Parts 1b, 2a, and 2b) *Resource Library*. www.desiringgod.org. Desiring God Foundation, May 1-2, 2013. Accessed July 15, 2013. <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/seminars/biblical-eldership-part-1a>.

Then pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota, Piper presents in seminar form (with online notes provided) an overview of biblical teaching concerning eldership, beginning with a theology of the Church and extending to a discussion of the practical service of elders. Piper's presentation is clear and well-organized, soundly based upon Scripture. He refers to and recommends Alexander Strauch's work listed above, the nineteenth century Baptist Hezekiah Harvey's *The Church and The Pastor: His Qualifications and Duties*, Richard Baxter's *Reformed Pastor*, Presbyterian Samuel Miller's *The Ruling Elder*, Charles Bridges' *the Christian Ministry*, and Berghoef and DeKoster's above listed *Handbook*. In addition to his exegetical and doctrinal presentation, he relates his own experience of transitioning to elder leadership over a period of twelve years.

APPENDIX B
PROJECT LETTER AND SURVEY FORM

PO Box 304
31 Pleasant Street
Greenville, NH 03048-0304
T 603 878-1214
wtbroughton@mac.com

[date and pastor's name and address]

Sir and Brother,

I am writing to request your participation in a questionnaire survey related to a thesis-project in connection with my degree work for Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. The question under examination grows out of my own life experience of years growing up in small churches pastored by my father, as well as my own years of pastoral ministry in like congregations. In such ministry settings, the question of spiritual renewal and genuine growth constantly recurs. Might there be specific shepherding practices that would reliably encourage a congregation's spiritual health?

An answer proposed by some is that a spiritual flock will thrive to the extent that it is served by a cadre of competent elders, and it is this thesis that I am studying. Specifically, I am seeking to ascertain whether there is a positive correlation between the presence of a lay eldership that shares pastoral ministry responsibilities and their church's spiritual life. Therefore, the questionnaire enclosed aims at identifying the presence or absence of these two variables in a survey of churches.

Knowing the time constraints of a pastor, I have endeavored to keep the questionnaire short and the prompts precise. I would encourage you to respond with your first thoughts rather than spending much time refining your answers. Frankness, not polish, is that for which I am hoping.

With thanks for your consideration and hopes for your participation, I am your fellow laborer,

William Broughton,
Pastor, Greenville Community Christian Church

CHURCH LEADERSHIP AND LIFE QUESTIONNAIRE

Please respond relative to the church you presently serve as pastor. For multiple choice items, circle the letters to indicate your choices.

1. The church was founded in the year ____.
2. The church membership presently numbers ____.
3. The average Sunday morning church attendance is ____.
4. The church's setting is... a. rural. b. suburban. c. urban.
5. I have pastored this church for ____ years.
6. My position is... a. full time. b. part time.
7. Are there other paid pastoral staff members? ____ (If yes, indicate how many: ____.)
8. The church's elected governing body is a(n)... a. board of elders. b. diaconate. c. committee. d. other (please describe) ____.
9. This group has pastoral duties including (*choose all that apply*): a. counseling b. teaching c. preaching d. visitation e. mentoring f. corrective discipline g. none of the preceding

If you circled choice "g" for #9, skip #10.

10. On average, how many hours per week does a member of this group spend in these duties? ____

Acts 2.42, 45 reads "...they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers...And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need." The following questions seek to reflect these qualities. Please indicate what percentage of your congregation that you think are described by the characteristic noted.

11. participating weekly in some learning activity (such as a group Bible study) ____
12. have close friendships with other church members ____
13. regularly taking part in the Lord's Supper ____
14. practicing personal and family prayer ____
15. generously giving material resources to meet the needs of others ____

If you would care to do so, use the space below and on the back of this sheet to write your own comments about any relationship that you believe is evident between a lay eldership that is active in pastoral ministry and the well-being of the congregation. Thank you for your responses!

APPENDIX C

TABULATION OF SURVEY RESULTS

Explanation of Table Coding: The left hand column is for ID numbers, used simply for tabulation purposes. Numbers heading the remaining columns correspond to the numbered items on the surveys. Column 1 lists the year of founding of the church served by the recipient. Other entries in this column are: nr=no response, nd=not deliverable (returned by PO), inc=incomplete and unusable. Column 2 lists the total membership reported. Column 3 records average Sunday morning worship attendance. Column 4 specifies the church setting, using the code: 1=rural, 2=suburban, and 3=urban. Column 5 notes the number of years the respondent has served this particular church. Column 6 indicates whether the pastorate is full-time (1) or part-time (2). Column 7 lists the number of other paid pastoral staff members. Column 8 uses a code to categorize the type of leadership structure the church has, with 1 indicating a board of elders, 2 indicating a diaconate, 3 indicating a committee, and 4 indicating some other type of group. Column 9 indicates how many letters were circled by the respondent for that survey item, which would therefore indicate how many different types of pastoral duties are shared by the elected leadership. Column 10 records the number of hours spent by an individual member of the elected leadership carrying out the pastoral duties noted in the previous question. Columns 11-15 note the percentages for the corresponding survey items. The symbol (-) means that item was left blank on the survey form.

Survey Responses Table

ID Code	1. Year Church Founded	2. Members	3. Sunday Attendance	4. Setting: 1-Rural 2-Suburb 3-Urban	5. Years in Pastorate	6. Type: 1-full time 2-part time	7. Number of Other Staff	8. Governing Body Code	9. Shared Pastoral Duties	10. Average Service Hours per Week	11. % Members Learning	12. % Members Friends	13. % Members Communing	14. % Members Praying	15. % Members Giving
001	1735	42	55	1	2	2	0	1	5	5	80	90	90	55	95
002	nr														
003	nr														
004	1801	130	80	1	42	1	0	1	3	7.5	25	60	50	-	50
005	nr														
006	inc														
007	nr														
008	1836	21	23	1	3	1	0	2	2	2	50	80	85	40	60
009	nr														
010	nr														
011	1895	15	23	2	3	2	0	3	0	-	30	75	95	10	50
012	nr														
013	nr														
014	nr														
015	nr														
016	nr														
017	nr														
018	nr														
019	1735	240	400	2	10	1	4	1	1	2	75	80	90	90	60
020	nr														
021	1824	-	92	2	16	1	0	4	2	1.5	20	60	75	30	70
022	1644	300	180	2	30	1	0	4	0	-	27	-	-	-	-
023	nr														
024	1880	210	115	2	13	1	0	2	2	3	10	70	70	-	80
025	nr														
026	1986	12	14	2	26	2	0	1	6	7.5	80	95	100	98	30
027	1702	140	110	2	5.5	1	1	1	0	0	50	15	80	20	10
028	1683	185	125	2	18	1	0.5	2	3	1	40	80	90	40	25
029	nr														
030	nd														
031	nr														
032	1648	50	85	2	12	1	3	2	2	2	-	-	-	-	-
033	nr														
034	1809	-	1400	3	15	1	9	1	5	4.5	75	61	-	57	44
035	1934	75	85	3	29	1	0	2	6	5	50	80	95	75	80
036	nr														
037	1928	135	200	3	38	1	1	2	3	3.5	35	80	95	75	50
038	1892	40	60	2	4	1	0	4	3	-	10	60	90	-	20
039	nr														

ID Code	1. Year Church Founded	2. Members	3. Sunday Attendance	4. Setting: 1-Rural 2-Suburb 3-Urban	5. Years in Pastorate	6. Type: 1-Full time 2-Part time	7. Number of Other Staff	8. Governing Body Code	9. Shared Pastoral Duties	10. Average Service Hours per Week	11. % Members Learning	12. % Members Friends	13. % Members Communing	14. % Members Praying	15. % Members Giving
040	<i>nr</i>														
041	1828	99	80	2	9	1	1	1	5	4	30	75	75	20	80
042	1963	98	150	2	8	1	0	1	5	7.5	50	70	70	-	50
043	<i>nr</i>														
044	1713	30	30	2	14	1	0	1	6	3.5	70	80	90	99	80
045	<i>nr</i>														
046	<i>nr</i>														
047	2006	250	200	2	7	1	1	4	6	7.5	65	90	99	95	70
048	<i>nr</i>														
049	1798	40	72	1	25	1	0	1	4	3.5	20	60	80	-	30
050	<i>nr</i>														
051	<i>nr</i>														
052	2001	40	65	1	11	1	0	1	0	0	25	85	100	50	80
053	1755	85	140	1	7	1	0	1	3	4.5	70	80	95	60	70
054	<i>nr</i>														
055	<i>nr</i>														
056	<i>nr</i>														
057	<i>nr</i>														
058	1805	35	30	2	2	2	0	1	1	2	-	-	-	-	-
059	<i>nr</i>														
060	1789	49	70	1	9	1	0	1	6	3	70	80	90	70	75
061	<i>nr</i>														
062	1945	11	15	1	7	1	0	1	5	0	50	95	95	20	95
063	<i>nr</i>														
064	<i>nr</i>														
065	<i>nr</i>														
066	1792	65	75	1	9	1	1	1	3	1	60	80	95	30	90
067	<i>nr</i>														
068	1807	40	26	1	10	2	0	4	6	-	-	-	-	-	-
069	1827	100	100	1	9	1	1	4	3	1	60	90	95	75	75
070	<i>nr</i>														
071	<i>nr</i>														
072	<i>nr</i>														
073	<i>nr</i>														
074	<i>nr</i>														
075	1832	100	65	2	19	1	0	1	4	1.5	75	75	90	50	90
076	<i>nr</i>														
077	<i>nd</i>														
078	<i>nr</i>														
079	<i>nr</i>														

ID Code	1. Year Church Founded	2. Members	3. Sunday Attendance	4. Setting: 1-Rural 2-Suburb 3-Urban	5. Years in Pastorate	6. Type: 1-full time 2- part time	7. Number of Other Staff	8. Governing Body Code	9. Shared Pastoral Duties	10. Average Service Hours per Week	11. % Members Learning	12. % Members Friends	13. % Members Communing	14. % Members Praying	15. % Members Giving
080	nr														
081	1747	160	90	1	10	1	0	2	3	0.5	50	60	95	30	50
082	1973	27	55	3	25	1	1	1	3	2	20	85	80	-	60
083	nr														
084	1971	55	95	3	40	1	1	1	5	10	50	50	80	50	20
085	nr														
086	nr														
087	nr														
088	nd														
089	nr														
090	nr														
091	nr														
092	1826	30	20	1	4	2	0	4	4	4	50	75	100	75	50
093	nr														
094	nr														
095	nr														
096	1985	50	40	2	6.5	1	0	2	2	2	20	100	100	100	40
097	nr														
098	1824	137	77	1	28	1	0	4	2	0	11	44	44	11	14
099	1978	58	105	3	34	1	1	1	6	-	-	-	-	-	-
100	1833	85	65	1	0.5	1	0	1	6	1	40	50	70	60	60
101	nr														
102	nr														
103	1842	240	275	2	36	1	4	4	0	0	-	50	95	50	65
104	1815	140	80	1	11	1	0	4	2	0	-	-	-	-	-
105	1818	85	65	1	15	1	0	4	0	0	50	75	100	75	90
106	nr														
107	1887	40	25	1	14	2	0	4	0	0	16	100	100	100	100
108	nr														
109	1812	145	85	1	9	1	0	4	0	0	-	95	80	70	40
110	1858	420	310	1	9	1	1	4	5	3	-	-	-	-	-
111	inc														
112	nr														
113	1955	47	65	1	4	1	0	1	6	5	60	60	70	40	40
114	nr														
115	nr														
116	nr														
117	1860	55	37	1	4	1	0	3	0	0	-	-	-	-	-
118	nd														
119	1904	155	70	1	9	1	0	1	4	5	10	70	60	20	25

ID Code	1. Year Church Founded	2. Members	3. Sunday Attendance	4. Setting: 1-Rural 2-Suburb 3-Urban	5. Years in Pastorate	6. Type: 1-full time 2-part time	7. Number of Other Staff	8. Governing Body Code	9. Shared Pastoral Duties	10. Average Service Hours per Week	11. % Members Learning	12. % Members Friends	13. % Members Communing	14. % Members Praying	15. % Members Giving
120	nr														
121	nr														
122	nr														
123	1746	230	150	2	3	1	0	4	4	3	20	50	75	10	25
124	1894	148	70	3	47	1	1	4	5	-	30	50	50	-	30
125	inc														
126	1877	65	55	1	11	2	0	2	3	2	10	50	85	15	70
127	nr														
128	1902	70	46	2	8.5	1	0	4	2	1.5	-	-	-	-	-
129	1750	200	125	1	1	1	0	2	3	1	60	95	80	50	70
130	nr														
131	nr														
132	nr														
133	nr														
134	nr														
135	nr														
136	nr														
137	1818	142	60	1	29	1	0	4	0	0	20	70	60	35	40
138	nr														
139	nr														
140	inc														
141	1822	135	140	1	32	1	1	2	3	5	35	60	65	40	50
142	nr														
143	1817	66	71	1	9	1	0	3	3	0.5	29	70	95	80	-
144	nr														
145	1826	80	42	1	23	2	0	4	0	0	30	90	85	60	60
146	nr														
147	1840	30	24	1	18	2	0	3	0	0	10	60	95	30	40
148	1804	90	35	2	10	2	2	4	5	10	50	70	100	90	20
149	nd														
150	1845	800	400	2	31	1	3.5	2	0	0	80	80	50	-	50
151	nr														
152	1863	202	93	3	7	1	0	4	5	1.5	5	55	50	25	-
153	nd														
154	nr														
155	nr														
156	1886	115	115	1	3	1	0	1	4	3	65	75	85	50	70
157	nd														
158	nr														
159	1884	90	84	2	26	1	1	4	0	0	50	75	90	50	75

ID Code	1. Year Church Founded	2. Members	3. Sunday Attendance	4. Setting: 1-Rural 2-Suburb 3-Urban	5. Years in Pastorate	6. Type: 1-Full time 2-part time	7. Number of Other Staff	8. Governing Body Code	9. Shared Pastoral Duties	10. Average Service Hours per Week	11. % Members Learning	12. % Members Friends	13. % Members Communing	14. % Members Praying	15. % Members Giving
160	1880	35	70	1	12	1	0	1	5	3	45	90	100	25	50
161	-	86	75	1	2.5	1	0	2	2	2	20	100	90	25	80
162	1875	135	150	1	12	1	2	4	-	-	50	80	95	50	80
163	nr														
164	1870	80	26	1	17	2	0	2	0	0	20	90	90	90	80
165	1867	105	79	2	12	2	0	1	1	1	25	50	80	75	30
166	1837	5	-	2	5	2	0	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
167	nr														
168	nr														
169	1887	110	65	1	1.5	1	0	2	4	2	30	60	70	10	90
170	nr														
171	18--	90	-	1	1	1	0	2	1	2	20	80	80	75	70
172	1889	321	190	1	3	1	0	4	1	1	60	80	70	39	30
173	1879	60	47	1	6	2	0	2	3	5	35	25	90	25	25
174	1937	200	150	2	5	1	4 p/t	4	0	0	35	80	80	20	30
175	nr														
176	1883	78	34	1	18	1	0	2	0	0	5	-	100	-	100
177	nr														
178	1865	50	60	2	22	1	0	1	4	3	75	80	80	80	50
179	1847	48	90	-	1	1	1	1	6	4.5	50	40	80	80	50
180	1858	144	40	1	12	1	0	3	0	0	10	30	30	30	25
181	nr														
182	nr														
183	nr														
184	nr														
185	1860	95	70	1	12	1	0	4	0	0	30	80	95	90	-
186	1895	48	40	1	2	1	0	4	0	0	10	73	83	25	6
187	1893	45	43	1	5	1	1	2	1	0.5	20	60	75	-	60
188	1891	40	25	2	11	1	0	1	3	1	50	100	100	50	100
189	nr														
190	1867	260	190	2	11	1	1	1	5	2	50	90	80	30	65
191	2007	25	45	1	6	2	0	4	3	2.5	10	60	98	60	70
192	1872	110	75	2	5	1	0	3	0	0	35	-	85	60	75
193	1977	150	200	2	4	1	3	1	6	4.5	80	80	95	80	50
194	1865	110	70	1	9	2	-	-	6	-	-	-	-	-	-
195	nr														
196	nd														
197	2005	111	245	3	7	1	2.5	1	1	0	-	-	-	-	-
198	nr														
199	nr														

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200	1941	76	58	1	11	2	0	-	2	-	18	50	80	40	60
201	nr														
202	nr														
203	nr														
204	nr														
205	nr														
206	1987	85	180	1	5	1	2	2	1	2	60	90	100	85	90
207	nr														
208	1882	250	175	1	8	1	0	4	3	0	28	75	70	60	60
209	1882	105	70	1	18	1	0	1	1	-	40	90	90	40	60
210	1884	50	35	1	6	2	0	3	0	0	35	80	90	75	80
211	nr														
212	nr														
213	1974	159	550	1	16	1	1	1	6	1	60	80	90	50	70
214	nr														
215	nr														
216	1917	175	61	1	11	1	0	4	0	0	2	100	35	2	10
217	nr														
218	nr														
219	nr														
220	nr														
221	nr														
222	nr														
223	1862	162	160	1	7	1	0	1	4	3.5	40	80	90	50	70
224	1841	180	75	1	8	1	0	4	0	0	-	-	-	-	-
225	nd														
226	nr														
227	1907	220	112	2	4	1	3	3	4	3	-	-	-	-	-
228	1800	135	100	1	2	1	0	1	5	8	-	-	-	-	-
229	1876	25	18	1	10	2	0	1	0	0	-	20	75	20	20
230	nr														
231	nd														
232	nr														
233	1868	30	40	1	20	1	0	4	0	0	-	-	-	-	-
234	1857	260	90	2	4	1	1	4	0	0	20	40	75	10	15
235	1876	-	40	1	16	1	0	4	0	0	-	-	-	-	-
236	nr														
237	nr														
238	nr														
239	nr														

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240	1907	150	95	1	8	1	2	4	0	0	-	-	-	-	-
241	<i>nd</i>														
242	<i>nr</i>														
243	1998	14	14	1	14	2	0	1	5	6	75	100	100	75	50
244	<i>nr</i>														
245	1886	225	120	1	4	1	1	1	6	3	50	90	90	90	60
246	<i>nr</i>														
247	<i>nd</i>														
248	<i>nr</i>														
249	1910	50	20	1	9	2	0	4	2	0	30	75	100	-	0
250	<i>nr</i>														
251	1808	125	60	1	19	1	0	2	-	-	10	75	50	50	70
252	<i>nr</i>														
253	<i>nr</i>														
254	1894	300	250	3	9	1	1	3	5	5	25	50	75	50	25
255	1870	17	20	2	2	0	0	1	2	1	70	100	90	90	90
256	<i>nr</i>														
257	<i>nr</i>														
258	<i>nr</i>														
259	1924	450	400	2	2	1	5	1	5	5	70	80	90	70	60
260	<i>nr</i>														
261	1921	125	70	1	6	1	0	2	3	1	30	90	75	30	60
262	<i>nr</i>														
263	1887	35	26	1	10	2	0	2	4	8	25	100	100	50	100

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